

Poison Victory

by Albert E. Cowdrey

Science fiction and fantasy readers are sometimes accused of being a bit provincial, but our editors are so cosmopolitan and wide-ranging that we even read the message boards of other magazines. It's true! Recently we spotted an interesting discussion at *www.asimovs.com* on the subject of alternate history stories, specifically about what distinguishes good ones from bad. Here we offer up a fine—if grim—example of the form, a tale that looks back at the Second World War with a keen and unflinching eye.

* * * *

2 September 1949. Ordered to appear at the prison in Kalach this morning. The Gestapo's nabbed a serf named Nevsky who claims to be one of mine. The charge: terrorism.

Poor devil was already a mass of blood and bruises. *Obersturmführer* Müller—an insufferable little beast dressed up in a new black uniform with the silver skull insignia—wanted me to identify him. I wouldn't have known him even before they worked him over.

“You're aware that I have over a thousand serfs?”

“Yes, the biggest landholder in the Great Bend of the Don,” said Müller, voice dripping with envy. “Perhaps you have too many for proper control.”

“What exactly is the charge against this man?”

Well, he'd been spotted carrying a rook rifle.

“Is it conceivable that he may have been shooting rooks? The peasants hate them because they steal grain.”

“It is absolutely forbidden for a serf to have a weapon of any type whatever. As you may be aware, we live in uneasy times.”

“I suppose you mean the guerrillas. Perhaps dealing with them is too big a job for the SS, and that's why you're unable to exert proper control.”

Rather a neat riposte, I thought. They can't catch this guerrilla chieftain who calls himself the Ataman, so in order to look busy they arrest a peasant with a pellet gun. I can see the report they'll send to that

Eichmann fellow who struts around as Reich Protector of the East: *An armed Russian was arrested and under severe interrogation confessed to—*

Whatever they please. And I can do nothing. Eichmann would automatically reject any appeal on Nevsky's behalf, and I'd merely get myself even deeper into his black book. *Scheissdreck!*

* * * *

Took the Porsche for a drive up the new Volga parkway, hoping to recover my equanimity and clear the smell of the prison out of my head.

A few kilometers were enough to heal my spirit. What a glorious country this is! The rolling, wheat-heavy steppe, birds wheeling and crying, sunlight the color of pollen. Some of my serfs were helping to landscape the parkway, and they paused in their work to take off their caps, the honest fellows! I gave them that stiff half-salute that makes Marya tell me I must think I'm waving a scepter.

Near Führerburg I turned onto a side road, parked in a peaceful spot, and lit up a cigarette. The city lay before me—the Krupp-Ost factory, the new worker housing under construction, pillars of steam and smoke staining the clear air. At that distance the Victory Monument on the old Tartar burial mound of the Mamayev Kurgan seemed only an enigmatic shape, and the sun slanting through veils of smoke gave it a grandeur it entirely lacks when clearly seen.

God, what a hell this place was once! How many beloved comrades died for it! How many brave Slavs were entombed here beside them! They say you can't dig a cellar without finding bones. I accept the view endorsed by so many experts—English and American as well as German—that we Aryans form a superior race. And yet in death, when the brain is gone and nothing lingers but the bones and the soul, how hard it is to tell Russian from German, serf from master!

Shaking off these grim thoughts, I started the engine and drove to my fine new townhouse overlooking the Tsaritsa Gorges. A kiss from Marya. Dinner, then my daily task of filling a few pages in this journal. I visualize the text in English, which all Germans of my generation had to learn, then transpose it into my personal cipher. Rather a simple one, as anyone managing to read this must know! But it will have to do—I don't have an Enigma machine, and if I did I'd be afraid to use it, after all we've learned

recently about the work of English code-breakers.

Marya is preparing for bed, humming an old Cossack folk song as she shrugs into a nightgown embroidered with little roses. A faint smile lights her round face, like the face of a *matryushka* doll, and her slanted eyes touch me lightly with a certain glance. She says, “Are you going to scribble in that silly notebook all night?”

Nein, meine Liebe, nein! A moment only, and I’ll put it away inside my big, ornate presentation copy of *The Complete Writings and Speeches of Adolf Hitler*—in the space I’ve hollowed out with a razor (as if the original contents weren’t hollow enough!). Then back into the safe my silent friend and father confessor will go, for the time has come to live my life, not write about it.

* * * *

3 September 1949. Waked at 0530 by a call from Müller’s adjutant. Nevsky has been beheaded by guillotine.

Very curious, this fondness of the Gestapo for the chief implement of the French Reign of Terror. At least it’s painless, unlike their other methods involving piano wire and meat hooks.

I was ordered to drive Nevsky’s family out onto the road to starve, as a warning to others. Well, one advantage of being a big landowner is that I can move them to another of my villages, where they’ll lie hidden until the whole episode is forgotten. Sent Marya to the estate to take charge of this duty, which I’m sure she will discharge with her usual cleverness and womanly compassion.

Meanwhile, I sat down to deal with a vast pile of paperwork generated by the bureaucrats at the *Ostministerium*. I’d barely started on this unpleasant duty when the telephone rang again. I picked it up with foreboding, only to hear—with astonishment—a friendly voice!

My wartime comrade Dietrich Wallenstein had arrived, all the way from Berlin. At once I abandoned my task and drove, a happy man, to the Veteran Officers Club where Dietrich was staying. And there he sat at the bar, clutching an elegant new attaché case and looking as much like his old self as anybody can after gaining thirty kilos. Well, he’s a big cheese now, a troubleshooter for the General Staff, so I suppose he comes by his big gut honestly.

Soon he and I were seated at a quiet table, a schnapps bottle and two glasses between us. When I asked for news, he passed one fat hand over the pepper-and-salt bristles on his head and responded, “*Na*, can you guess who’s become a nobleman?”

I groaned. “Not you!”

“*Jawohl!* I am now Graf von und zu Rostock.”

“Another Nazi nobleman,” I said, when we’d toasted his new distinction. “And to think how Hitler hated the aristocracy!”

He leaned toward me, small pouchy eyes gleaming. “It grieves me deeply to tell you this,” he whispered, “but our beloved Führer is dying.”

No surprise there. On 20 April of this year—his sixtieth birthday—Hitler visited the Volga frontier to see the War Memorial dedicated. I was granted the honor of being seated close enough to smell his farts, which were frequent. He looked dreadful—gray-faced, trembling. Astounding contrast with the heroic figure on the monument. I’m surprised he’s lasted this long.

I nodded, and Dietrich went on, his voice sinking even lower: “Last week there was a funeral rehearsal at the Great Hall of the Reich. Pal of mine’s a theatrical director, did some work with Riefenstahl, and he was in on it. The whole thing’s to be broadcast on television—first time ever—so Goebbels had actors play the leading Nazis to get the lighting perfect. They got hold of a 300-kilo freak from the circus to stand in for Göring. Since he was too fat to walk, a couple of Polish serfs wheeled him in. Everybody had to keep a straight face, but I understand there was a lot of giggling in the wings.

“By the way,” he added casually, “you’ve been invited to the funeral. I made sure of that.”

“I won’t go.”

“Oh, yes you will. I’ll tell you frankly, rumors have reached Reich Security that you’re no longer politically reliable. High time for you to do some fence-mending, old boy! Attend the ceremony, look solemn, wipe away a tear, salute like an automaton, and prepare to enjoy the spectacle when the long knives start flashing. Things are going to get nasty as the satraps fight for the succession. With luck, they’ll kill one another off, and

the Nazi business will be over for good. Here—take this.”

He handed me the attaché case, a capacious one covered in crocodile skin. Inside were some welcome gifts and one unwelcome one. A framed enlargement of an old photograph—God knows how it survived—of Dietrich and me during that other life we lived during the war. Also a bottle of good Scotch whiskey; and six cartons of real Virginia cigarettes. All most welcome and deeply appreciated. But also a large envelope of heavy cream-laid paper, with black borders and an embossed swastika, which was *not* appreciated.

“I don’t see why I’ve got to go at all,” I complained. “I’m no politician, not even a soldier anymore.”

“My friend, you’re a hero. That’s your burden, so don’t try to escape it now. Without you we’d have lost Stalingrad—pardon me, Führerburg—and then the whole war would’ve been in the toilet.”

He leaned forward and gently struck my shoulder with his closed fist. “I’ve always regarded you as Germany’s savior. The monument on the Mamayev Kurgan should be to you.”

I had to turn away for a moment to hide my emotions, which as usual were contradictory and troubling. Dietrich has a heavy thumb, and he’d put it down on my greatest shame and my sole claim to historical importance—that to save my life and the lives of my comrades, I made it possible for Hitler and his cronies to dominate the world.

When I regained my composure, our talk turned to practical matters. Dietrich warned me that the guerrillas are growing bolder. I should watch out for the Ataman. He’s supported by the Russian government in Siberia, and Khrushchev—that crude, tough Ukrainian peasant who overthrew and executed Stalin—is receiving aid from the British and Americans.

“So don’t,” said Dietrich, “be surprised if some very sophisticated weapons start showing up in guerrilla hands. We’re *die Übermacht*, the superpower. Naturally, everybody hates us.”

Then it was time for him to go about his business—something secret, he didn’t discuss it with me. I tried to return his attaché case, but he absolutely refused. The container, he said, was part of the gift. We gripped each other’s hands and he exclaimed, “*Auf wiedersehen, mein alter Freund und Kriegskamerad!*”

Farewell, my old friend and wartime comrade—words that sounded to me like the end of a funeral oration.

Marya was waiting for me on my return home. I asked how the widow's holding up, and she shrugged, "Pretty well."

"It must be hard for her."

"Sure it is. But we all have to bear what we have to bear. Life's not just a walk across a field, you know."

That's a peasant saying. One hears it everywhere.

She tells me she hid the family in Gorodok village, where hatred of the Gestapo is so intense that betrayal is unlikely. Last year the Orthodox priest there turned out to be an SS informer. On a winter's night, in thirty degrees of frost, his house caught fire and he and his family were roasted alive. Later, Marya told me she'd heard that the door and the window shutters had been nailed shut. Yes, I think Nevsky's survivors will be safe enough there.

* * * *

4 September 1949. This evening I'm all alone in my country house on the banks of the "quiet flowing" Don. Here on my 5000-hectare estate I truly feel like the great feudal lord I'm supposed to be. But also, in Marya's absence, quite lonely.

The wheat harvest's beginning, and like old Tolstoy I'd hoped to join the peasants in some good, honest toil. Alas, it was not to be. I spent the whole day on the damned phone, trying to find the new tractors I'd ordered. Meanwhile the serfs began reaping with scythes, and I crossed my fingers, hoping the Gestapo wouldn't decide those are weapons too, and arrest my whole workforce.

Tonight all's peaceful. Outside the circle of light cast by my lamp the shadows press close. In the country darkness crickets are shrilling, no idea in their little heads how soon the first frost will arrive. Seemed like a perfect time to open my new attaché case and take out the photograph, the whiskey, a few packs of cigarettes I brought with me, and of course the *Writings and Speeches*. The fact that I choose to hide my treasonable journal inside Hitler's book is, I suppose, an example of heavy Teutonic irony. But then, as Marya sometimes hints, I am a rather heavily ironic

Teuton, in my own way!

This month is a dark anniversary for me. Just seven years ago, I arrived on the Eastern Front for the very first time. A lifetime, no an age ago.

I'm staring at the picture now, hardly able to recognize the skinny young fellow in the wire-rim glasses who stands beside grinning Dietrich. Twenty-nine I was then, old enough to have missed the Hitler Youth and all that Nazi rubbish. Something of a child despite my age, the product of a loving home and years of quiet work in schools and laboratories. A frightened child too, for in those days we Germans dreaded an assignment to Russia as Christians feared an assignment to Hell.

Never will I forget my first sight of Stalingrad from the rattletrap old Messerschmidt that brought me. First, brown streamers of smoke rising and dirtying the pure late-summer air. Then the city itself, its broken buildings like headstones in a desecrated graveyard. We bumped and shuddered down on the pockmarked runway, and I climbed stiffly off the plane like a damned soul disembarking on the wrong side of the River Styx. It didn't help that two dusty, disheveled veterans unloading my spotless new luggage grinned and asked sardonically, "How's the weather in Berlin, sir?"

At HQ I met Dietrich for the first time. He was an adjutant and took me in charge, finding me a place to sleep, then arranging a five-minute meeting with General Friedrich Von Paulus. My new commander wasn't at all what I'd expected—a pale, cool, fastidious man who spoke courteously even to a *Grünschnabel* like me. Later on, Dietrich confided that the general always wore clean underwear, even on the battle-field.

"He's what the Tommies call a *gentleman*," he explained, using the English word. "More scientist than soldier, I'd say. You two ought to get on well, though why in the world we need a chemical officer I'm sure I don't know."

Yes, that was my title. I was straight out of the I.G. Farben laboratories in Frankfurt-am-Main, where I'd hoped to evade military service by doing research for the war effort. Instead, by 1942 we'd lost so many men in the East that the army was ready to grab anybody—even me!

Dietrich and I soon became pals, and began calling each other *du* instead of the formal *Sie*—in fact, the photo records the day we sealed our

friendship by drinking a small glass of schnapps with linked arms. A good fellow to know. He'd already developed his remarkable talent for getting his superiors to do whatever he wanted them to, and within a month, at his suggestion, Von Paulus relieved me of my useless task as chemical officer and made me his personal aide.

As a result, I was soon learning things about the war that I'd rather not have known. Our atrocities, for example. The full history of our treatment of the Jews has never been written and now, I suppose, never will be. At home one was aware of the vulgar Nazi attacks on them, which began with insults and ended with mob assaults. Nonpolitical people like my family thought the whole business a *Kulturschande*, a blot on civilization, and we averted our eyes as I suppose civilized Americans avert theirs from the lynchers who murder their blacks.

Russia made such evasion impossible. In our own army area, seventy-five Jewish orphans were imprisoned by the SS under vile conditions, then ordered to be shot. When Colonel Mannstein, our chief of staff, tried to save them, the SS sent in a party of Ukrainian militiamen who murdered all the children right under our noses. I was present when Mannstein stormed into HQ and shouted at Von Paulus, "We can't and shouldn't be allowed to win this war!"

Some commanders would have backed him up—others would have arrested him. Typically, Von Paulus did neither. He merely listened, shook his head, said nothing. I thought this cowardly of him, little guessing the role I myself would play in the war. Today he's Chief of Staff in Berlin and I'm a great feudal lord in the East, while Mannstein's broken bones lie in some Gestapo killing ground, buried in quicklime. In 1944 he joined a group that tried to assassinate Hitler; he was betrayed, arrested, tortured in a disgusting manner, and strangled in six stages with a piano-wire noose.

Is this always the fate of the decent and the brave? Will Von Paulus now take vengeance for him and all other victims of the regime by staging a military coup? Surely his chance will come after the Nazis have finished bloodying one another. Looking back on the cautious general I first got to know in the autumn of '42, I have deep doubts whether he possesses the nerve for desperate deeds. Yet at Stalingrad he did one thing that was totally out of character, and by doing it saved all of us—yes, and the Führer too.

* * * *

5 September 1949. All day hard at work outside. Glorious weather!

The new tractors finally arrived, but with them came a human pimple from the *Ostministerium*, who informed me that only Germans can drive them! He spouted the usual rubbish that only Aryans can handle complex machinery, when the real purpose of the SS is to prevent Russians from learning to do anything but the crudest hand labor. They are to become a people without skills, without knowledge, even without songs.

Well, we didn't have any Aryans available, so I sent the pimple away, put my men and women into the drivers' seats, and off they went to do the job. Many had been trained as tractor drivers on the collective farms that still existed a mere nine years ago, so why not make use of them? Another black mark against my name in Herr Müller's book, damn him, and another tidbit he can pass on to Eichmann.

I returned to the country house about sixteen o'clock, greatly in need of a bath and a nap, both of which I took. Waking refreshed, I found that Marya had arrived to help with the harvest. So we made love, a fine ending to a fine day. I need her to remind me that I'm still a young man in years, even though old in spirit.

And now I sit here once again, pen in hand, ready to encode my memories. My lethal memories. Oh yes, they are deadly. For I am one of the few still living who know how we really won the war. Now perhaps the time has come to set it down, even if only in cipher.

* * * *

The battle had been raging for a month when I arrived in Stalingrad. Much of the city had been ground and pummeled to a coarse dust, and the first chill wind of the approaching fall swept up the grit and scoured my face like a sandstorm.

The ruins stank of cordite, feces, rotting corpses. Everywhere were hidden ditches and sewers and storm drains, from which Ivans would suddenly emerge with tommyguns blazing. Shrapnel-battered steel and concrete buildings had to be cleared of their defenders floor by floor—one such fortress held out against fifty-eight days of continuous assault. We paid a heavier toll of men to win a single block of Stalingrad than to conquer whole western nations.

We'd already lost so many that our flanks were held by our Axis allies, all of them ill-equipped and unhappy to be fighting so far from home. Von Paulus was too intelligent not to see the danger in this situation. And he was

getting disturbing reports from patrols and from the Luftwaffe about vast enemy movements to the north and south of the city.

A terrible scenario formed in his mind, and began to invade his dreams.

I slept in the same bunker as he, and one night heard him cry out. I ran into his quarters and found him awake, sitting up on his cot, shivering and rubbing his eyes. In a whisper, he told me that in a nightmare he'd seen the Russians assail both our flanks at once, trapping the whole Sixth Army in a vast encirclement. Next day I whispered the story of the general's dream to Dietrich, and he expressed deep concern.

"Still, what can be done?" he shrugged, with true Teutonic fatalism. "If it happens, it's *unsere Schicksal*, our destiny. That's all."

Well, *I* thought something could be done. That evening when the general and I were alone for a few moments, I presumed to tell him a secret known to very few. The laboratory where I'd worked in Frankfurt had invented a war gas that could defeat the Russians, if only we dared to use it.

"Poison gas?" he asked skeptically. "Everybody used it in the last war. A cruel and stupid weapon that made war uncomfortable, to no purpose. Anyway, Hitler's forbidden its use, maybe for personal reasons. You know he was temporarily blinded by gas in 1918. Or maybe he's simply afraid of Allied retaliation."

"Herr Generaloberst, this is not your ordinary war gas."

I told him how, back in the thirties, one of our chemists began to fear that he was going blind. A microscopic amount of a new organic insecticide had caused the pupils of his eyes to close part way, shutting out the light. In time we learned that the chemical was a cholinesterase inhibitor. The precise formula was a closely held secret, but everyone could see how it worked—it affected the motor nerves so that the muscles could contract, but could not relax.

It was given the name Tabun. In larger quantities it caused violent cramps, followed by convulsions of the whole body and paralysis of the muscles that control breathing. Conventional gas masks were useless, and even rubber suits couldn't protect fully against it. We now had three types of the gas: Sarin was twice as toxic as Tabun, Soman three times as toxic as Sarin.

“Well then,” said the General, who had been listening with obvious distaste, “we can’t use it. Our lines are often only a few meters from the Ivans. We’d be poisoning our own men.”

“Then don’t use it in the city,” I replied eagerly, quite forgetting my inferior rank. “With Luftwaffe cooperation you can use heavy bombers to break up the enemy concentrations to the north and south of us, and also on the east bank of the Volga. When the enemy forces in the city have no support and receive no reinforcements, we can destroy them.”

He shook his head wearily.

“A pretty theory! And how long would it take to manufacture the quantities we’d need and load it into bombs?”

“It’s already there. Slave labor from three concentration camps has been at it for years, suffering great losses in the process. Himmler himself gave the green light to make the bombs and stockpile them in underground arsenals, in case Hitler ever gives permission to use them.”

“And you expect some bureaucrat in Munitions to defy Hitler’s orders and ship this stuff to us?”

“Not a bureaucrat. The new Munitions Minister. I met him years ago at the Berlin Institute of Technology. His name’s Albert Speer. He’s the Führer’s fair-haired boy, and because of that he can take risks that nobody else would dare even to think about.”

At first Von Paulus wouldn’t hear of my idea—indeed, he ordered me not to bring it up again. But reports of the Russian buildup continued to filter in, and the messages we got from higher headquarters diverged farther and farther from reality. One day in mid-October, he brought up the forbidden subject himself.

“I think you need to take leave,” he told me abruptly. “Your mother’s dying of cancer—didn’t know that, did you? She doesn’t know it either, the lucky woman. Compassionate leaves are routinely denied, but I’m the commander, and herewith I’m giving you ten days and putting you on the first flight out.

“See your old school chum in Munitions if you can, and if he agrees to supply us the stuff, head for Luftwaffe HQ. I’ll give you a letter to a friend of mine, a general in Transport Command. The weapons will have to be

delivered by air, and quickly. I believe the Ivans will attack us at the first snowfall, or shortly after.”

So that was how it all began. Once in 1947, when I was drunk at the Veteran Officer’s Club, I called our triumph *das Giftsieg*. The poison victory. Thank God, everybody else was as drunk as I was and the remark passed unnoticed! There are things that a man who wears two Iron Crosses and the Knight’s Cross can say with impunity, and others he cannot.

Yet I spoke the truth, and though I have no religion I can’t help but believe that one day I will be called to account by a higher and juster power than the Gestapo. Mannstein was right, after all—we shouldn’t have been allowed to win the war.

I know that now. But in 1942 I was twenty-nine and wanted to live, no matter what.

* * * *

6 September 1949. Another day of splendid weather. Hard work—how beautiful hard work is! The muscles ache, but the spirit knows peace. Then home for a hot bath, a nap, love in the afternoon, and dinner.

And now, late at night, I get back to my self-appointed task as stenographer to Clio, the Muse of History. Speaking of fate, I now realize that this is mine. Like the tyrant in Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus*, the Nazis cut out the goddess’s tongue so that the crimes of the past cannot be told. But through me she speaks—even though no one may ever listen!

I saw Speer. Handsome as ever, superbly intelligent, yet devoted heart and soul to the Austrian necromancer. So devoted that he would even disobey him in order to save him. Who can explain it? With his promise in my pocket, I hastened to Luftwaffe HQ, where the necessary cargo planes were made available to move the weapons to the Stalingrad Front.

Meantime the Russians too were hard at work. In late October they seized a number of strategic hills inside our lines. As if to aid their attack, winter arrived early with twenty degrees of frost. Intense cold already gripped the northern reaches of the Volga and ice floes drifted past Stalingrad, grinding against each other so loudly that our men in advanced positions could hear them groaning all night, like the souls of the lost.

By then I’d returned from Germany. With Von Paulus’s permission I

let Dietrich in on the secret, and it became his task to track the movement of the weapons. The nerve-gas bombs were in crates stamped “oxyacetylene cylinders, extra large size,” so that he could follow them through routine supply messages. On 10 November 1942 an encrypted signal brought word that planes carrying the weapons were even then droning over the snow-powdered fields of western Russia.

At this supreme moment, I found Von Paulus drawn and white. If he failed to use nerve gas, the Russians would destroy him; if he did use it against Hitler’s explicit orders, he might be arrested and shot. And I might be shot too, though I could always plead that I was only following orders, something the commander could not do.

I don’t think either of us slept more than a few hours during the next five days. Nor did Dietrich, who for the first time in our friendship lost his bouncy good spirits. The usual glitches developed in the rear areas. At an airfield near Rostov where the weapons were to be transferred from the transport planes to the bombers, they were almost lost through a paperwork error. After a frantic search of ninety minutes during which we all aged a year or two, they were discovered in a warehouse, stored among ordinary oxygen and acetylene tanks. If welders had actually used them, the results would indeed have been interesting!

At last came the night of 15 November. I’ll never forget it. The weather was still and bitter cold—one of those Russian nights when the Kalmuk steppe seems to hold its breath and even the dead grasses cease to tremble. A thick crust of ice had formed over the autumn snow and lay hard and white as bone under a carborundum sky.

The bomber pilots knew only that they would be dropping some sort of experimental device, and since Hitler was always ranting about secret weapons, they accepted this story without question. Leaving Dietrich behind, I accompanied the General in his staff car to the Italian sector of the line. We were a few kilometers west of the city, a place of acute danger where the Russians held bridgeheads over both the Volga and the Don, and so could attack at will.

We stepped out into the terrible cold, and walked slowly toward the north. The car waited with its blue-shielded headlights off, the motor grunting and a plume of white smoke jetting from the tailpipe. And then we heard overhead the Focke-Wulf-190s droning toward the enemy positions!

White fingers of searchlights began to spring up and the *put-put-put* of distant anti-aircraft guns began. The lights would find a plane and lose it

again. Tiny objects tumbled through the beams, but we didn't hear the usual deep grumble of exploding bombs, for the weapons carried only small charges designed to rupture the casings and disperse the gas. I tried to imagine what it must be like for the Ivans, meeting a silent and incomprehensible death. Then I decided not to think about such things, remembering how back in Frankfurt I'd disgraced myself by passing out during a movie that showed the effects of Tabun on a flock of sheep.

Von Paulus was smoking a cigarette, which of course was strictly against the blackout regulations. He offered one to me, and though I'd never smoked up to that time I felt obliged to take it with a "*Danke, Herr Generaloberst.*" He struck a match, I inhaled and promptly went into a coughing fit.

He laughed and slapped me on the back. "That's right, *mein Junge,*" he said. "Stay away from tobacco. It's not healthy."

Next day brought unmistakable evidence of great disorder in the enemy's buildup areas, plus hysterical accusations from Radio Moscow that we had opened gas warfare. Ignoring all of this, plus a barrage of queries from Army Group South trying to find out what was going on, Von Paulus imposed radio silence and ordered a full-scale assault against the Russian positions in Stalingrad.

The time was well chosen. Our troops split the center of the enemy's line and began rolling up the pockets that still held out. After three months of desperate fighting in the greatest urban battle known to history, our sorely tried and war-weary soldiers stood at last upon the riverbank, gazing at the famous Volga—a wide, bleak, turbulent stream surging with brown water and dirty white ice. A sight for which their comrades had already paid a hundred thousand lives!

Now Von Paulus had to face Hitler and tell him what he had done. Cleverly, he sent first a radio message: *Mein Führer! I am pleased to lay at your feet the conquered city of Stalingrad. Your genius in directing this assault now stands clear for all the world to see. Heil Hitler!*

Then he flew off to the Wolfschanze, the Wolf's Lair as Hitler called his headquarters. Whether he would be shot remained in doubt for at least a week, until it became clear that the Western Allies possessed no nerve gas and could not use conventional poison gas to retaliate without running the risk of seeing London and other English cities submerged in clouds of Tabun, Sarin, and Soman.

Shortly afterward Von Paulus returned, much older in appearance but with the jeweled baton of a Field Marshal clutched in his hand. As so often happens in war, bold action by a local commander achieved what the bigwigs at higher headquarters had failed to do. Of course it was death for anyone to say so—Hitler as usual claimed all the credit for himself, and a falling blade, a bullet, or a wire noose awaited anybody who told the truth.

But truth, like the bones of the dead, has a way of reappearing over time.

* * * *

7 September 1949. Disturbing news this morning. Müller, the prison commandant, has been found lying in his comfortable country house with his throat cut.

I heard the news from Marya, who got it from a peasant. She whispered that an order went out from the Ataman last week condemning Müller to death for his many cruelties. Of course everybody on the lower Volga knew about it, except us Germans!

I asked her if she had any idea who'd done the deed. She said no, gazing at me with the special limpid innocence in her round face that means she's lying.

"Come now, my girl," said I, "don't try to deceive your old soldier! It wasn't one of our people, was it?"

She hesitated, then after a moment said softly, "*Vdova Nevskaya* was missing from her new home this morning. Her children are crying."

Good God! Nevsky's widow! If this leads to the discovery that I've been sheltering the family, then it's good-bye to my feudal estate on the Volga! In this world, can one perform any decent act without regretting it?

Noon. This is turning into a busy day. The radio brings news that Hitler is dead at last. If only some Austrian nursemaid gifted with prophecy had strangled him in his crib, how much the whole world would have been spared!

He's being embalmed and his funeral is set for a week hence. So I'll have to go to Berlin. Dietrich was right—I can't afford not to, especially with this Müller business hanging over me. On the other hand, that will leave my

people here with no defender when the SS descends on them like the Biblical iron besom of destruction.

One can only hope that the bloodletting in Berlin will begin very soon and distract the butchers from what is, after all, only a local crime.

Later still. Marya reports that Müller's serfs have been arrested and are undergoing interrogation. Trying to distract their tormentors, they'll begin to accuse anybody and everybody. Those they name will be arrested and tortured, and so on and so on, until the entire district is depopulated. What will happen to the harvest now, God only knows.

Marya is helping me plan my trip. Lufthansa is putting on extra flights to Berlin, and a single phone call got me a first-class seat. I have four days before my flight takes off. I can only hope the Gestapo mars its hitherto perfect record of incompetence by finding the real murderer quickly—and that the killer's not one of my people!

With that off my mind, I could almost enjoy seeing Hitler off to Valhalla, or to Hell, whichever it may be.

* * * *

8 September 1949. No fresh news about the murder, but arrests have begun in the serf-warrens outside the city. Everywhere the fear is palpable. I feel it too, although the danger's far greater for the Russians.

I rely on Marya more than ever to keep me informed. She tells me that the Nevsky children have been taken into other houses of the village. The prison at Kalach has been sealed off, and nobody knows what's happening inside, although one can easily guess.

The harvest is almost done. I was in the west field watching the mechanical reapers at work this morning when I was summoned back to the house to take a long-distance call from Dietrich. A special hundred-man Heroes' Farewell to our beloved leader is being planned for the small Memorial Chapel on the morning of the funeral. No doubt a Goebbels inspiration—a kind of Viking farewell to the supreme warlord. Through Dietrich's intervention, I'm to be one of the Heroes. The whole Nazi gang will be there to honor us—Bormann, Himmler, the younger generation like Eichmann.

I know Dietrich set this up because he's trying to save my neck, but sometimes I wish he wouldn't work so hard at it!

After the service, we'll leave the chapel and march at the head of the funeral cortege down the whole length of Adolf-Hitler-Allee to the Great Hall of the Reich, while the Berlin Philharmonic plays the slow movement from Beethoven's *Eroica*. Good thing the composer, who hated tyrants, won't be around to hear it!

* * * *

9 September 1949. Back in the townhouse. Let me try to be calm.

Eichmann is here in Führerburg. Local landowners were ordered to assemble today on one hour's warning at the Veteran Officers' Club.

There we were harangued by the Reich Protector—tall, sallow, clean-shaven, arrayed in black and silver like a pall draping a coffin. Unless rumor lies (and in these matters it seldom does) he was a key figure in butchering the Jews—nobody even tries to guess how many died in that *Aktion*—and is now engaged in liquidating some forty percent of the population of White Russia who have been judged to be “racially unworthy of existence.”

His talk was brief and to the point. Himmler has ordered a drastic security clampdown throughout the Eastern Territories. Spots of rebellion are to be stamped out with utter ruthlessness. Obviously he fears that the news of Hitler's death will lead to violent outbreaks, perhaps even a Russian invasion, just at the time when Berlin is in turmoil over the succession.

“Particularly important [said Eichmann] in the Volga District is the liquidation and annihilation of the band led by the terrorist kingpin who calls himself the Ataman. Müller's murder has been traced to a peasant woman, but of course she did not gain access to this officer's guarded home all by herself! She is now undergoing rigorous interrogation. No doubt the Ataman thought to deceive us into believing the murder was merely a case of private vengeance. We're not as innocent as that!

“No, this was the opening of a campaign to destabilize German authority throughout the East. We National Socialists know how to deal with such threats! I remind you gentlemen of your duties in this regard. Every whisper of information is to be passed on to Gestapo headquarters at once. No shielding of pet serfs will be tolerated.”

Fixing me with a raptor's eye as he said it. Nazi bluster but, as usual,

real ferocity behind it. I was more shaken than I like to admit. The Nevskaya woman may not know that I ordered her and her brats to be hidden, but she certainly knows that Marya arranged it all, and if she talks—

And of course she'll talk.

Back in 1944, after the conspiracy against Hitler failed, Mannstein was so unfortunate as to be taken alive. Foolish of him, but I think he had religious qualms about committing suicide.

At the Club, years after the event, I heard an SS man describe what happened to him. They worked him over for a whole day and in the evening, when he was weak and in great pain, they brought him a bucket with his daughter's head in it. At that he broke down completely and confessed to everything, for he had no more desire to live.

The creature who told this tale—loudly and drunkenly, while standing at the bar—gave a laugh at the end and said, like some burlesque Nazi in a BBC comedy skit, "We have ways, you see. We have ways."

Later. I drove to the estate, hoping to calm my spirit by watching the harvesters finish up their work. I was in the fields when a serf ran up and told me that in my absence a Gestapo car arrived in Führerburg and took my Marya away.

Later still. Drove like a madman to the serf-prison, but could not see her. Eichmann was there, I saw his big black Mercedes with his flag and his motorcycle escort lounging around. He wouldn't meet me, being—as a little *Untersturmführer* said with an undisguised sneer—"busy."

Busy! I know how these people keep busy.

Midnight. Back at the townhouse. No word yet. I have the bottle of Scotch and my Luger lying on the table in front of me. I will not repeat Mannstein's mistake when they come for me. But *what is happening to Marya?*

I can only hope that she gave them everything and everyone to save herself pain. Tell them whatever they want to hear, my love, tell them I'm a Russian agent, tell them I'm Khrushchev in disguise, it doesn't matter. They will take nothing but my corpse, and to that they are welcome.

What is happening to her now?

* * * *

10 September 1949. The call came at 0520. The ungodly like ungodly hours.

A gelid voice announced her death “in process of judicial interrogation.” So that’s what they call it now.

“You will be responsible for funeral arrangements,” the voice continued. “The body must be collected today. Otherwise it will be cremated.”

Somehow I spoke coherently, though without feeling, the way one walks on frostbitten feet. “You’re releasing her body, then?”

“The juridical process failed to reveal that she was involved in illegal activities or had knowledge of such activities.”

His voice betrayed his disappointment. They were gunning for me, but I’m a pal of Dietrich Wallenstein, a big landowner, an official Hero of the Reich with two iron crosses and a knight’s cross. To catch me, they needed evidence.

And Marya didn’t talk. In spite of all their little ways, she didn’t betray me.

Later. I have seen her body. That’s why they returned it to me. They wanted me to see what they’d done to her.

Stupid of them. Do they think only they know how to kill?

Took the Porsche, drove to Gorodok. Typical run-down Russian village. The ruins of the priest’s house haven’t been cleaned up yet. I called the village elders together. They were out in the fields and took some time to arrive.

I waited, smoking American cigarettes. Hands quite steady. Now all compromises are over. I know what I’ll do, provided I can get help to do it.

I’m leaving for Berlin tomorrow, so things will have to move fast. That worries me a bit. Things don’t usually move fast in Russia.

Finally the elders showed up, two graybeards wearing boots and

embroidered peasant smocks. Both looking like Rasputin. I explained what I needed. Obviously they knew all about Marya, and nodded silently when I promised to attend the proposed meeting anywhere, to come alone, and to carry no weapon.

They sent for vodka. However poor they are, they always have vodka. We drank, and I got it down without choking, though it was dreadful stuff. Home brew.

Then back to this house. Hand steady, I wrote out the key to my code, folded it into my journal. Think I'll sit up tonight, don't feel like sleeping. No tears, no prayers. Reread Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which has always moved me greatly. It tells about the redemption, not of a hero, but of an ordinary mediocre man, when at last his evasions and pretenses come to an end.

* * * *

11 September 1949. A peasant lad guided me to a small patch of woods near Gorodok. I began to comprehend that this village must be the command center of the guerillas. No wonder the priest was burned!

Two rough-looking fellows confiscated the attaché case I was carrying, stared blankly at the manuscript inside it, then patted me down and led me deeper into the stands of birch and larch trees. The man I'd come to meet was sitting on a log, smoking. I noted that he too favors American cigarettes. Nice of Khrushchev to keep him supplied.

The Ataman is a small man but wiry and strong. Round head and black, thinning hair. Asiatic eyes.

"I asked Marya about you a couple of years ago," he began. "We're both Cossacks, you know. That's why I call myself Ataman, meaning head man. Once I asked her, 'What's this "good German" of yours really like?' She answered, 'He means well, but he's a man from whom truth is hidden.'"

"What truth?" I asked, feeling like Pontius Pilate.

"That you can't rid yourself of the guilt of your crimes as long as you continue to profit from them. That was what she told me, anyhow."

"My profiting is over. You have the sort of device I asked for?"

"Maybe. Anyway, I know what you're talking about. Things like that

have been arriving lately. All the way from America, just like Mickey Mouse. Tell me how you plan to use it.”

I explained about the Heroes’ Farewell. “I’ll be in a small chapel with them, the whole bunch of them. The Nazis who corrupted my people and butchered yours. It’s a confined space and it’ll make a fine gas chamber. When they realize what’s happening, they’ll rush the door, but it’s narrow, so they’ll get jammed in the opening. Some may get out, but not many.”

He grunted. “At first I wasn’t inclined to help you. We’re not supposed to use the stuff for personal vengeance, only for political and military advantage. But if you can wipe out the whole leadership ... well, that’s about as political as you can get. This stuff is stronger than the old nerve gases, or so I’m told. About thirty times stronger. It’s an American improvement. Americans are always making things better, aren’t they? It’s compressed into small containers. Open one and it rushes out, howling like one of those new jet planes coming right at you. You know how it kills?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not a pleasant death.”

“No.”

“Why are you doing it? I suppose it’s Marya, what they did to her.”

“Yes.”

“All those millions of dead, and the torture of one Cossack woman drives you to this.”

“Yes. You know, she never betrayed me.”

“In *The House of the Dead* Dostoevsky said, ‘The people know how to suffer.’ *She* knew how to suffer.”

“Yes. Give me the stuff and let me go.”

He stood up then and kissed me. I’ve never gotten used to this Russian custom. “May God receive you. I’m a Communist, and I shouldn’t say things like that. But what the hell, when you find somebody who’s decent, you have to treat him decently. Life isn’t a walk across a field for any of us.”

“No. *Pozhal'sta*, give me the stuff and let me go.”

And so he did—a yellow cylinder about forty centimeters long, easily concealed. Obviously designed for use by terrorists. I have a thermos bottle that'll hold it nicely, if I remove the glass lining. I tried it in my new attaché case, and it fits.

To make room for it I had to take out this journal. “What's that?” the Ataman asked.

“Secrets the world may want to know. Or may not, I don't care. I want to make a last entry, about this meeting. It'll take me only a few minutes.”

He nodded, and I sat down on the log beside him and began to write. Once I looked up and he was eyeing me oddly.

“What's wrong?”

“Just wondering what you've got to smile about.”

I tried to tell him, but couldn't. To understand, he'd have to be here in this place where my soul stands at last. So close to the end, so close to the beginning.