

*The nations have sunk down in the pit which they made,
in the net which they hid, their foot is caught.*

PS 9:15



Transnistria

PROLOGUE

GRIGORIOPOL, TRANSNISTRIA

The enemy is in retreat. The Russians, finally, are packing up. So they say.

In Grigoriopol, a hamlet in the rogue territory of Transnistria wedged between Moldova to the west, Ukraine to the east, there is apprehension. Moscow's troops are on the move.

Going back home, or redrawing more borders? Who knows. No celebration when agreements are broken, words bent, frontiers wiped out by tanks.

Kerschen Anthal, the retired local mailman, sits on a bench in the empty square, lost in thought. He hunches forward, elbows on knees. With a pointed stick, he traces circles in the gravel between his feet.

An army truck, Russian military, shatters the early afternoon peace. ZIL 157. Kerschen stares at the faded red star. He squeezes his eyes shut, small craters in his bleak landscape of a face. Seventy-seven, next month.

The light in the square blinds him, but so does his hatred for these invaders from the frozen east. Occupiers. Bloodsuckers. For three quarters of a century.

Goodbye, you bastards, he thinks. Wherever you go, if you really go.

Grigoriopol, one of Stalin's experiments in forced deportation. Thousands of German families uprooted and dumped into eastern Europe to pick up the slack after Hitler exterminated the local Jews – and to make them pay, by forced labor, for the reconstruction of the great fatherland. The USSR.

Today the locals stay inside. *We've been under their boot so long we like it.*

The devils they know.

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Kerschen understands, but he doesn't agree. *Auf Wiedersehen, Schweinehund!*

He feels a bad gut, the slimy nausea that comes from spoiled meat, or too much vodka the night before. It passes from person to person, here, in the countryside, maybe even across the borders into Ukraine and Moldova, like some new strain of influenza. They have no resistance.

What now? Neighbors peek from windows, the shutters closed.

Not Kerschen. *Cheer up.* The postmaster straightens his spine, shifts on the bench and crosses his legs. This is sickness leaving, not coming. Another twist of events in a monstrous era.

Stalingrad, Winter 1942

Kerschen's father, Matthias Anthal, departs from the village of Hirbuchen, in the German state of Saxony where he was born, on a September afternoon in 1939, a tall thin puppet between the red flags and black swastikas, popping up to wave. "Goodbye, back soon, goodbye *Liebchen.*" He sees his wife Minna, and all the rest, one-year-old Kerschen on a neighbor's shoulders. They wave back from the side of the road as he passes.

Kerschen's father is a farmer, leaving them, and his life, to join the 29th Infantry Division, a Wehrmacht unit created in 1936, filled with self-proclaimed supermen on fire for National Socialism and the Reich. A lot of Thuringians, and now 23 year old Matthias Anthal, who never traveled outside Saxony, really never outside Hirbuchen, but who heard *der Führer* speak on the radio, and believes him.

"The Nazi army is invincible. It will occupy Poland in less than a week, hoist the swastika from every bell tower, and impose a triumphant new order before the end of the winter."

A winter that will last for two generations.

At the outset the Germans are doing well. The U-Boat offensive is unstoppable. Rommel has Tobruk. The Wehrmacht soon owns Denmark, Norway, France, the Low Countries, and the Balkans. Czechoslovakia and Poland. Great Britain on its knees.

June 22, 1941. Time to move on. *Die Ostfront*. Hitler does an about-face, flipping the bulk of his forces toward the eastern front. The irony - a German-Soviet non-aggression pact Hitler and Stalin sign in '39 - gives the Führer time to beef up the resources Germany needs to turn on its eastern ally two years later. He pivots, crosses the border into Russian-held territory, and invades the Soviet Union. Yesterday, the USSR was Hitler's partner in crime. Today, it is just another big tortoise waiting for the Nazi scorpion's sting.

None of it matters to Matthias Anthal, now a Sergeant, who gets to give orders, occasionally, instead of taking them. He likes Poland. The ease of conquest. The acquiescence of European neighbors, even Great Britain who believes, as Matthias does, that History is on Germany's side.

Matthias no longer worries about his fields in Hirbuchen, or the grain he cannot harvest.

He worries about the next march, the next campaign, moving east to seize, as the Führer says they must, the oil fields in the Caucasus - without fuel the panzers stop, the Luftwaffe disintegrates.

Here's what Sergeant Anthal knows, what his colleagues whisper 'their' higher-ups are saying. *Generalplan Ost*, the enslavement and eventual extermination of eastern Europeans and Russians, has to happen fast, before the United States moves.

Sergeant Anthal's Infantry Division, the 29th, is assigned to the German 6th Army, which begins the drive to Stalingrad. Hitler's victory at Kiev leaves him cocky, the Russians weakened. "We have only to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down," the dictator proclaims.

When Sergeant Anthal reaches the Don River on August 23, 1942, Stalingrad is already burning - the Luftwaffe dropping more than a thousand tons of bombs on the city, igniting firestorms, incinerating whole districts, workers and civilians.

Stalin orders everybody to stay in place. "The city's defenders will fight harder, the greater the torment. There is no land beyond the Volga." The communist Commissars gun down their own troops when they falter, or even turn their faces from the Nazi onslaught.

Hitler responds in kind. "On the spot execution of the Ger-

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man commanders who allow retreat. No coming back without victory.”

It is now a game of evil wills.

The battle for Stalingrad is the bloodiest, most savage military combat on record. History’s cage, fighters locked in until the bitter end. Four out of every five German soldiers sent to the front die in the east. More than a million corpses pile up in and around the city of Stalingrad, wash down the Volga, burn, rot, or feed scavengers who gorge on fresh supplies of flesh, staying alive themselves for another hour, another day. The Luftwaffe continues to pound the rubble, breaking walls into stone, stone into pebbles, pebbles into dust.

Till there is nothing left to destroy.

What rages is combat, up-close-and-personal, in ruins, streets, factories, cellars, and staircases. Firefights in the city’s sewers - ammo sparking off pipes and walls, stringing narrow tunnels with fire-cracking blue-white light. The rounds, in a wild dance of their own, kill indiscriminately, shooters as dead as their targets.

The enemies meet in bombed-out residential buildings, in apartments like the ones where they dined back home with friends. Where they brought wine and flowers. Now the Germans crawl up demolished stairs, and from the top floor, a roofless shell, they fire, through holes in the floor, at Russian soldiers in the apartment below.

The German soldiers joke. “We’ve taken the kitchen, on to the living room and the bedroom.”

Weeks go by. Ferocious, building-to-building fighting confounds the German troops. Without panzer support, they’re on their own.

In the winter of 1943, after the Russians break through German flanks, they lure the 6th German Army into the center of Stalingrad, encircling hundreds of thousands Wehrmacht troops, trapped now in a frozen monument to Hitler’s vanity.

The Russian troops form a formidable double encirclement, facing inward toward the city center, where the Germans try to fight on and may break through, and facing outward, from where the Germans may receive support and rescue. Hitler’s commanders in the city tell the Führer it might be possible to blast open a narrow corridor, and run for it.

“Nein.”

Hitler orders air drops until they can send ground relief. The trapped Germans need 800 tons of food and ammunitions per day. Luftwaffe aircraft manage one-tenth that amount. Hitler’s air bridge fails. The Russian winter closes in on the German troops, who withdraw further and further into Stalingrad’s icy core. They freeze. Starve. Engage in suicidal skirmishes. The Soviets toy with them now. It’s nearly over.

On January 21, 1943, Sergeant Anthal’s unit is attacked by Stalin’s 21st Army and destroyed.

Grigoriopol, mid-morning

Kerschen Anthal remembers that his father’s hair was red, that he lifted him high in the air, spoke to him gently before he left, and tried to make him laugh.

Laugh?

Kerschen’s generation landed on the wrong side of a divided Germany. The Russian sector. Ethnic Germans are still packing in the early 1950s, loading family photos and the china salvaged from the war into boxes, heading to Ukraine. And beyond. Taking directions from Stalin’s henchmen.

Kerschen and his mother are carted south, to Ukraine. Next stop, Moldova – the town of Grigoriopol in the eastern part, a trading post thrown up by the Russians in the 1700s.

What follows is a slow, painful struggle of wills between the displaced Germans and their Bolshevik masters. The oppressed of Grigoriopol harass and confound their captors, not with guns and tanks, but with their stolid resistance to the Soviet authority, their nothing-left-to-lose indifference to their fate.

Lead us to water, you Soviet SOB’s. We will never drink.

Kerschen opens his eyes. Everywhere lies evidence of the siege - in the roadbeds churned up by the tracks of Russian armored vehicles, in the miserably stocked windows of the shops, in the corroded facades of once elegant buildings. Even the air buckles under the noxious fumes.

Only two tributes to Grigoriopol’s better days remain: a local

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tavern, renamed the '*Krasnaya Besarabia*', whose lobby displays a few shabby relics of pre-war glamour, and an imposing gate to a 19th century hunting lodge built by Prince Grigory Chubarov, sagging and rusty, but a kind invitation still to the imagination of the tired nobody who occasionally pauses on his way home to stroke the ornate grill.

Kerschen Anthal no longer imagines.

After a lifetime delivering mail in Grigoriopol, he wants nothing except to live out his retirement years in peace with his wife, Margaretha. She's German, like Kerschen. They have all they need to make their simple lives work.

But this recent change unsettles him. Just like in 1989, when the Berlin wall collapsed, today history is once again in the making. Kerschen wants to sound the drum roll. To be part of the story. The Russians are moving their troops to Crimea, some people say at the tavern, or to areas strategically more significant than Transnistria. Or perhaps they are just replacing obsolete, tired units with fresh ones.

His eyes stray again to the faded red star on the door of the truck stalled on the other side of the square, a piece of Russian crap struggling spasmodically to gain traction, backing up, moving forward.

Was machen Sie? Just get the hell out.

Kerschen, almost three times as old as his sergeant-father was when he died, focuses once more on the truck across the square. Runs his fingers through his thin white hair. He shoves the tail of his shirt under his waistband and repositions himself on the bench.

A second Russian rig, another ZIL, rolls off a side street. The bare-chested driver guns the engine. The huge wheels shovel up dust and gravel. The second truck pulls up beside its weaker twin. Idling engines puke out greasy smoke, a filthy cloud that rises a few feet before it balloons over the frantic actors below.

Soldiers begin unloading metal cases, camouflaged green, stacking them up next to a vacant house.

Kerschen can't make out the markings. *Steel boxes. Must be something worth having inside.*

"Retreating soldiers are more dangerous than advancing ones," he recalls the words of Johan Donau, another ethnic

German, schoolmaster until 1998, a know-it-all despised by his neighbors. No one protested when Johan was purged for supporting the reintegration of Transnistria into Moldova.

“These Russians aren’t going to haul all that crap back to Crimea, or Siberia. They’re going to sell much of it. Get some, you deserve it.”

And it dawns on him, the retired postman, the down-trodden yet free-at-last Kerschen, that he is not without a shopping list of his own, a hazy wish-list he tries suddenly to flesh out with images of possessions he still cannot conceive of owning.

Think, man! A gun. A rifle for my nephew. A young man from Hamburg, who visits Grigoriopol every fall to hunt boar. Or bear, if he gets lucky.

“If you need a weapon,” Johan tells him over drinks one night, after his wife Margaretha has gone to bed, “go for a Kalashnikov.” Donau’s tone is superior, smug. “Cheap, dependable, never jams, doesn’t even need cleaning. Around the world Kalashnikovs have killed more people than atomic bombs.”

And now, the Russkies are giving them away for so little...

Kerschen is energized. He pushes himself off the bench. *The occupiers are moving. That means bargains. Why stop with the rifle? Why not go for an off-road vehicle? A VAZ-469, maybe. Legendary for reliability and performance.*

He has a brown envelope hidden behind his bedroom mirror. His life savings. Enough for the Kalashnikov for his nephew, and maybe even a VAZ.

If I leave now for Velykaya Pobeda, I can be back before dinner.

He races home, into the bedroom.

“Are you hungry?” Margaretha calls from the kitchen. “I have soup.”

“No.” Silently he shoves the envelope with the cash under his shirt, stuffs his pants into his socks, adjusts his old cap, flies out the front door, and fires up his Voskhod-2 motorbike. He can cover the 60 km to the black market for Russian arms in a bit more than an hour.

Kerschen rides for half an hour toward an abandoned Russian army test-range. Gunfire. Not close, but it echoes through the valley. Terrified, he turns off the engine. *People testing weapons.*

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The shooting stops.

It's hot, the middle of the afternoon. Sweat slides off his face, pools for a moment in the notch of his collarbone, then spreads downward, salty tributaries tunneling through the hair on his old man chest. He pulls the money envelope out. Folds it once, twice, stuffs it into his back pocket. He lifts his hand up to wipe his forehead. Restarts the engine. He's making good time across the flat terrain. Not far now.

Another barrage: pop! pop! pop! The sharp punch of the AK-47? Perhaps even an old Thompson? Uncle Sam sent thousands to Uncle Joe through Lend-Lease. Some, old and rusty now, stockpiled right here in Transnistria. Perhaps.

How many chances does a man get to lay his hands on a vintage Thompson 11.43-mm gun?

The road splits. One rusty sign reads: Belaya Doma.

Schnell, Anthal. Make up your mind.

He stops again, breathing hard.

It might be better to take the route to Velykaya Pobeda, through Glinnaja. Steeper, but shorter.

The less traveled path. Good. No one on the road.

The bushes in the valley fade into forest—fir trees, chestnuts, hardwoods that took root long before Kerschen or the Soviets knew there was a place here where men would fight and suffer. Where they would bargain for weapons designed to keep the misery alive. No rain for weeks, and the wheels of Kerschen's motor-bike kick out long shafts of dust. Nature, the green hills, the vegetation, disappear. Desolation.

What's going on? Gott im Himmel.

Here too, souvenirs of the Russian occupation. Abandoned, corroded military debris. Motor oil, a blue-black sheen, congeals on the river's surface. Old trees, the sacred oaks, splintered, burnt. *Sacrifices to some ghastly ritual commemorating slaughter, even after the killing stops.*

There are deep slashes in the hills, left there by armored vehicles. No harvest. Not even next year.

The slope gets steep, very steep, till he reaches the top of the hill.

A humming sound. He stops. A hundred yards away as the crow flies, downhill behind a screen of bushes, a vehicle grapples with the rough incline.

Kerschen drives the motor-bike deep into the undergrowth beside the road. He crouches beside it.

What the hell is this?

The vehicle stops, its motor running.

Someone barks out orders in Russian. The vehicle sets off again. *Probably heading for Belaya Doma.* The halfway point between Velykaya Pobeda and Grigoriopol. The road he decided not to take.

The rig is huge, five pairs of enormous wheels. On the door, ZIL-135. A giant, camouflaged container on the bed. The driver curses. He grabs the steering wheel with one hand, cranes his head out the window, measuring the challenge.

They must come from the XVIth Brigade, based east of Grigoriopol. What the hell are they going to do in Belaya Doma? Why are they heading west, instead moving to Crimea?

The ZIL 135 moves slowly, followed by a jeep UAZ-469, hidden up to then behind the larger transport vehicle. The convoy slinks down the long gradient, like a fat ballerina performing on an unfamiliar stage.

From where he crouches, he has an unobstructed view of the Velykaya Pobeda valley spread out below him. A Russian officer in the jeep gives directions to the truck driver, cursing still, trying to park the ZIL under an umbrella of trees at the end of a clearing.

They're going to hide it.

The Russians finally wedge the goliath vehicle behind a thick curtain of tall trees and foliage. Kerschen's curiosity rises. He feels a perverse satisfaction. He envisions dad Matthias beside him, father and son watching the victors of Stalingrad moving east.

Kerschen lies quietly in the bushes, a blade of grass in his mouth. He feels a tickling on the back of one leg. He runs a hand up under his pant leg and squashes a marauding bug between thumb and forefinger.

He dozes. When he wakes up, the sun is approaching the hill-tops. In the valley, the Russian soldiers lie in the grass, taking the sun. Officers chat, smoke in the shade.

What to do? Margaretha is surely wondering where he is. In forty years of marriage, he has never been gone so long. Their house stands on the main road out of town. *A bad idea to leave a woman there alone. Today, with Russian troops on the move.*

He's heading home when he hears another engine. Dives back

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into the bushes. A commercial truck, an Iveco euro-cargo, drives past him, tires at eye-level. *Austrian plates?* He's not sure. The young driver, blond, sports green aviator sunglasses. Another guy, with dark complexion, on the seat next to him. They're moving fast, the truck's flatbed loaded with tarps held down by heavy chains. A large winch attached to the back sways in rhythm with the truck as it slams through ruts and over bumps. They stop at the end of the clearing, in front of the ZIL.

A deal. Dirty for sure. And Kerschen Anthal is watching it go down.

The Russian soldiers in the valley collect their gear and take up their positions. The ZIL starts to rock back and forth, the driver revs the engine, and the truck lunges out of the woods. Kerschen sees it clearly now. Russian soldiers surround the vehicles, climbing onto the rear of the ZIL, grabbing the winch on the Iveco.

Whatever they're moving is leaving the ZIL for the euro-cargo truck.

Suddenly the Russian soldiers scatter. They run for cover. Pandemonium from above.

Kerschen shields his eyes with both hands and scans the skies.

A thundering cargo helicopter approaches, six blades, heavy class, no markings. The entire fuselage is anthracite black: four pylons on each side carry rocket pods. In a matter of seconds, its rotors agitate the birch trees and the copter soon hangs suspended mid-air, a few hundred yards from Kerschen. Skirting the treetops, it drops lower still, its doors wide open. Hanging on the sides are masked soldiers, guns at the ready. The treetops brush the landing gears as the pilot lowers the huge bird a few more feet. The blades chop up some of the higher branches. The aircraft isn't maneuvering with the intention of landing.

Vegetation is too thick, the slope too pronounced.

The soldiers throw canisters from the open doors. Explosions follow, accompanied by flashes that momentarily disorient the Russian troops below – and Kerschen as well, despite the distance. His eyes start tearing up. Suddenly the masked soldiers jump from the portholes with guns across their shoulders, holding onto and sliding along white ropes.

Masked soldiers dropping from the helicopters. Who are these intruders?

A second and a third aircraft arrive, smaller in size, also anthracite colored, no rocket pods. Gracious in their tactical wide maneuvers. They fly so close to Kerschen that he can see the faces of the pilots, little micros against their lips and large earphones strapped over their heads. Just a few soldiers inside. The helicopters swoop above treetops, then dive low, very low. A whole platoon of masked men is now on the ground below. Colored roundels on their black outfits seem to indicate their rank, but no identity that Kerschen can recognize.

He braces himself against a tree trunk, protected by the dry leaves of low lying branches. If his sententious friend, Johan Donau, were here, he would explain it all: the aircraft specs, their weapons and firepower. How to tell the soldiers' nationality and rank. Or perhaps, no!, it may be impossible to tell where they are coming from as everybody and everything wears black – people, guns and helicopters.

The noise is deafening. The first attack helicopter is back high in the sky, no more troops on board. With a huge swoop, the pilot leaves the scene heading west. As the aircraft disappears towards the horizon, two additional black giant motherfuckers approach also at a high altitude. And stay up there. Through the open doors, heavy machineguns are trained on the valley. Flying in a racetrack pattern, each on the opposite side of the loop, they patrol the sky right above the attack. No apparent intention to land. No flag. No other markings.

Back-up teams, Kerschen surmises. But he is not sure.

Down in the valley, human cries drown out the shrill sounds of the overstrained small helicopter engines. More flashes of yellow-blue light accompany sequenced explosions. The ZIL and the UAZ are burning. The long metal case on the ZIL flat bed is ripped apart by more blasts, its electronic entrails consumed by rocket fuel combustion.

Kerschen falls to the ground, rolls down an incline, hitting a piece of rusty barbed wire. He cuts his forehead, blood rushes into his eyes. He grabs the end of his shirt, rips away the bottom buttons, and pulls the sweaty fabric up to his face. Once he can see again, he is not sure what he's seeing. He must be delirious.

A movie set? Yes, that's it.

D-day. A bridge too far. Kerschen is a film director now, pass-

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ing instructions down to the actors from his commanding place on the hill.

Aircrafts hovering. Soldiers shooting. Blasts and fires. The noise, the confusion, the smoke, the muffled explosions excite him.

No. No movie.

The killing of Bin Laden. The rescue of the Maersk Alabama.

This is for real. Like father. Actually, this is father's last battle.

He stands. "It's me, Kerschen Anthal, son of Matthias Anthal, Sergeant, 29th Infantry, 6th Army, hero of Stalingrad, defender of the Reich. Here, now, I declare victory over Russia!"

He raises his arm in a defiant gesture and shouts into the fire storm.

Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!

The intensity of the attack is decreasing rapidly. No more explosions. The Russian vehicles are smoldering wreckage. The secondary fires caused by the combat are dying out. It's getting dark. Spotlights from the back-up, high-flying large aircraft track mop-up activity on the ground. The masked soldiers are regrouping.

Once again the two smaller assault helicopters fly close to the ground past Kerschen, heading towards the other side of the hill. They disappear beyond its crest. The incursion must be over.

He's tempted to run towards the helicopters. Watch their lift-off. Ask questions. *Your nationality? What army do you belong? No, too dangerous.* Exhausted, he sits just in time to see the two assault helicopters remerge from behind the hill loaded with troops, lift back into the sky and disappear towards the sunset. Towards Moldova.

Kerschen retreats from his observation post. *They came, beat the Russians, and left. Who are they?* He has forgotten the Kalashnikov. And the VAZ.

He can find his way home without light, without guideposts. Years back, he bet his friends at the Krasnaia Besarabia tavern that he could deliver mail blindfolded, every letter into the right mailbox on schedule. He won the bet. His legs moved automatically, feet hitting the ground like a mason's shovel slapping mortar in dull, measured beats onto a lengthening shelf of brick.

He retrieves his motorbike in the bushes a few meters down

the road, kick starts the engine and slides downhill, in the direction opposite to the place of the attack.

What's for dinner? He thinks of his black bread with butter and salt, the waiting stein of white wine, the single adornment to his frugal meal. Especially welcome tonight.

The Russians terrify Margaretha. If Kerschen tells her about today, that's it. Hysteria. "You went looking for trouble with those bastards," he hears her shout. "And the attack: you could have been killed."

Riding downhill, with much wind against his face, is a pleasure. But soon it's dark, so he proceeds cautiously.

A figure steps out into the road. Kerschen loses his balance, the bike skids, the engine stops. Kerschen falls on his back. The man grabs the bike and starts the engine again. Accelerates. A second figure breaks through the underbrush, and takes off running after the bike.

The drivers of the Iveco truck.

Kerschen shouts, "Halt! I know you!" The man turns, almost incidentally, his face, his intentions obscured by distance and poor lighting.

Pow!

Kerschen's down, some wetness bubbling up from his gut, slipping across the surface of his belly. He feels no pain. Doesn't even hear the shot.

So this is how the Kalashnikov works! He has no idea what the Kalashnikov looks like, but is sure the weapon he came there to buy is the same weapon the stranger pointed his way and fired.

He remembers what his friend Johan told him: "After the war, the Russians copy our MP-44. They steal the blueprints from Germany, and presto! The Kalashnikov-47."

"Then an AK-47 didn't kill my father," Kerschen says, confused, as he always is when the subject of weapons comes up.

"No," Johan tells him. "Your father didn't get it from a Kalashnikov. It's a post-war weapon."

What does Kerschen care about all this now?

His vision clouds over, and he sees nothing. Suddenly it's dark.

He has tried, often, over the years, to imagine how his father felt when dying.

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“Do you think my father died instantly?” he asks Johan.

“Depends . . .”

“On what, Johan?”

“It depends on the weapon. The AK-47 kills faster and deader than anything the Russians had in World War II. It’s less accurate, but more reliable than the American M-16—which comes even later, yes, in the 1970s...”

Who cares whether it was an AK or not, thinks Kerschen. How strange dying is! You can’t keep your eyes open. That’s why you die. And that’s why is so dark.

He remembers nothing, not even a flash.

“It might have been a Dragunov,” Johan whispers.

The Dragunov, weapon of choice for the Russian marksmen who pick out the best men in the Wehrmacht and kill them, one by one. To weaken the troops’ morale.

Why am I listening to Johan?

The road is deserted. The old man is cold.

This is how my sergeant father died, the son thinks. The best man in his battalion, Matthias Anthal, picked off by a Russian sharp shooter with a Dragunov.

Kerschen feels his own life slipping away, the human frame crumpling in on itself, a constriction around his Adam’s apple, and the breakneck downward slide - like the nightmares that wake us, gasping, the terror fading after a long desperate first breath. A second. A third.

This is his comfort: *I am dying the same way my father died, the victim of a Dragunov.*

The minutes creep by. Johan appears again. He shows Kerschen a 9-mm Makarov now, a copy of the German Walther. “The KGB is partial to the Makarov,” the schoolmaster tells him.

Kerschen has a new thought. They shot him with a Makarov because he witnessed their dirty work at Belaya Doma.

He strains his head in the direction of Grigoriopol where Margaretha worries. His lips open, just a little, blood and drool running down from the corner of his mouth.

“No, not a Makarov. Maybe a Stechkin APS.”

What is Johan saying? Kerschen tries to turn his head in the schoolmaster’s direction. He can hear him talking. “The Russians used the Stechkin to shoot deserters and POWs. Bam!

Right in the forehead. And the Stechkin, my friend, is a copy of the German Mauser!”

Ach! They shot me with a Stechkin, so they didn't have to take me prisoner.

He's tired. He can't listen anymore to all those voices shrieking in his head.

Kalashnikov. Dragunov. Makarov. Stechkin. One of them killed his father. What difference does it make? It's a gun manufactured in a Russian factory, made by Russian workers. It's a Russian finger that pulled the trigger. On the father, on the son.

He smells the fresh grass, too sweet, too soft. Vomit, thick and tasting of honey, he thinks, crawls up his throat.

Three quarters of a century of hate. The collapse of the Soviet Union a quarter century ago. Today, the move of the Russian army towards Ukraine. No one left to kill.

His father looks handsome in his uniform and taller. He lifts Kerschen high in the air. They march through the square in Hirbuchen, floating on a tide of red flags and black swastikas.

Then they are gone.