Nikolai Grigorevich Smirnov

The Land of the Sun

Translated from the Russian

By

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Zemlyak – 2007

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X100

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This translation first published by clay jura'csik in 2007

Made and printed in North America
zemlyak
St. Louis, Mo

CONTENTS

Part Three

THE LAND OF THE SUN

About The Land of the Sun and its author

I'm not lucky at all. One autumn day in 1930 or 1931, I dropped in on a friend and was told: "Why couldn't you have shown up about twenty minutes earlier! Nikolai Grigorevich Smirnov was here… Yes, yes—that very Smirnov."

At the time, I could not be separated from Nikolai Grigorevich's amazing book called 'The Land of the Sun.' I had read the book about seven times, and then what poor luck—to just miss meeting its author. I would have certainly asked him whatever became of Lyonka Polosiev, and whether Bespoisk's grave was still preserved on Madagascar…

Then, in 1933, Nikolai Grigorevich died at the age of forty-three. Since then, many years have passed, but surprisingly enough, the people who knew him spoke of him even now as if he had just left the house an hour ago and should return any moment. It could not be otherwise. Nikolai Grigorevich Smirnov was a generous man—generous with his kind words, uplifting smile and friendly advice. Plus, he was infectiously talented.

A close friend of Nikolai Grigorevich, the writer, I.A. Rachtanov, recalls how easily, happily and naturally the author of The Land of the Sun had taught young writers by his example. "He need only take a pencil or feather in his hand and bring it to paper to create a penetrating subject as he drew lines and curves."

To be generous when Nikolai Grigorevich lived was not easy. During that time, there were three revolutions, World War I and the first Five Year Plan. Additionally, the Barricade of Presna occured, the Winter Palace was stormed and there was Perekop, the great time of construction.

Nikolai Grigorevich worked on one of these—The Kutnetsky development—during the final years of his life. He worked in a brigade of talented masters of the written word.

His literary journey began just several years before The October Revolution, in the St. Petersburg theater, The Crooked Mirror. Several of Nikolai Grigorevich's songs were performed on this theater's stage and all of them aroused the attention of the Tsar's censors.

During World War I, Nikolai Grigorevich worked in the revolutionary theater of Kaluga, writing songs and lecturing about art to the Red Army.

He went into children's literature in 1923 and it became his calling, devoting his entire soul to it. Soviet literature was given a boost in the early years of its development. Children's authors included K. Chokovsky, Samual Marshak, Aleksei Tolstoy and Yuri Olesh, and Nikolai Grigorevich took a worthy place among these ranks. He was a romantic in the truest sense of this word.

He gave only ten years to children's literature but managed to contribute a great deal, writing twenty books—from narrations to documentaries about large developments. Two of these have found a permanent place in the history of children's literature: The Land of the Sun, which came to light in 1936, and Jack Vosmerkin - The American, which showed up two years later.

Jack Vosmerkin is the story of a Russian boy who ends up in America, becomes a skilled mechanic and returns to his homeland during the time of collectivization, with the all-too-late idea of acquiring his own farm. Jack's tireless energy frees him from many illusions and delusions and, moreover; the author, by no means, hastily develops his hero into a fighter for the new rural order.

During those years, much was written on the subject of rural affairs, but none of it was very entertaining. Nikolai Grigorevich, however, could not create a dull story, and Jack Vosmerkin completely won over the hearts of readers of all ages with its witty subject matter, dramatic action and light, clean humor.

This story was read by the entire country and, while the book was not republished for many years, the image of the 'Russian-American' somehow became intriguing for latter generations. In the 50s and 60s, collective farm mechanics were often given the nickname, Jack Vosmerkin, though, most likely, only a few of them were actually familiar with the hero of this remarkable book.

Nikolai Grigorevich's talent was multifaceted. With uncommon ease, he transitioned from the age of universal collectivization to the era of Ekaterina, from Virginia to the village of Pochinka, and from Pochinka to the island of Madagascar.

The Land of the Sun stands apart from Jack Vosmerkin and the books about development during the first Five-year plans in regards to its much earlier setting back in history.

The last third of the 18th century is the timeframe for this book and its hero isn't seen in Moscow or Swiss-made jackets but, rather, dog-hide

frocks. However, this novel also stimulates readers with its witty ideas and rich color. It possesses the same intonation of sensitivity as in Jack Vosmerkin and the essays about Kuznetsky.

The Land of the Sun's hero was an exceptional individual. He was Moris August Benovsky, or Bespoisk – a native of Hungary; a subject of the German nation's Maria Theresa, empress of the Holy Roman Empire; Polish gentry; one of the founding leaders of the 1768 confederation. These were Benovsky's early years, about which many books have been written. The Land of the Sun's Benovsky is no longer a confederate leader, but a Russian prisoner who has been sent to far away Kamchatka. His further undertakings are quite uncommon. Having lured several Russian exiles to his side, he seizes the capital of Kamchatka, Bolsheretsk, kills the local ruler, Captain Nilov, acquires a ship and escapes the boundaries of the Russian Empire.

He sails halfway around the world by the following route: Kamchatka —Japan—Taiwan—India—Madagascar—France.

Benovsky was in life, as in this novel, an unusually colorful figure, possessing the arrogance of the gentry and the spirit of a daring adventurer. The 18th century witnessed similar adventures among such explorers and he left a comparable record of voyages as did Count Caliostro, Chevalier Eona and Princess Tarakanova. At the same time, this eternal wanderer and restless adventurer was dreaming of a radical restructuring of society, aiming to create a land of equality. Books of such reference at his time included Utopia, by Thomas Moore, and The City of the Sun, by Tommaso Campanella, and contained descriptions of the ideal republic with a bright future.

One of the author's main strengths was how strikingly he created the contrasting, capacious image of this contradictory man. Benovsky is cruel, crafty and self-interested, but it is not by chance that simple people are ready to go to the ends of the earth with him. Nor is it by chance that Lyonka Polosiev is so whole-heartedly committed to him, and who says in his narration: "He made mistakes the better part of his life and, in spite of this, people nevertheless followed him." They followed because they believed in his ideas and in his courage; they followed because they hoped to find freedom and happiness, though invariably and, at times, their chiefs were to also blame, this wonderful goal turned into a mirage, like Don Quixote's windmill. Sancho Panchez also followed Don Quixote all the way to the end…

The other characters are not shadowed by the figure of our main hero. All of them are described well as lively, passionate people, and of particular

importance is their 18th century tireless energy and other like details that are extremely valuable in this historical novel.

There is no doubt that readers will remember Lyonka Polosiev for a long time, as well as his father and Stepanov, Nilov and the other heroes in the story. Their bravery will appeal to Russian people, who will also find them worthy of Benovsky's enthusiastic exclamation: "Oh, Russians! You are an enchanting people, the likes of which I have not found anywhere else on earth!"

This wonderful book has become a bibliographical rarity and, undoubtedly, this publication will be loved by our readers.

Finally, one small note: This story was written when the island of Tiawan was given the name, Formosa, by Portugal in the 16th century. Benovsky also called it Formosa. Therefore, we did not find it possible to change the older name, though it has disappeared from geographical maps.

Y. Svet
1972

Land of the Sun

Part One

Escape from Bolsheretsk

1. Our Life in Kamchatka

"Lyonka," my father said to me, "go outside. If you see anyone, tap on the door two times."

I knew what that meant: father had decided to look over his gunpowder, which he kept hidden safely under his bed in a forged metal trunk. Therefore, without asking any questions, I went outside and stood by the door.

This trunk containing two poods of gunpowder was our only property. Father considered gunpowder to be more dependable than money, sugar or tobacco. He traded for it any chance he could, for whatever he had. And, after ten years, he had two poods. He hid his wealth from everyone.

Only once, when the fishing season was a bust and hunger began, did he exchange a decent-sized bag for a doe. We ate that deer for two weeks and then the fish started biting again. I also remember how father was once, supposedly, dying from the heat, called upon me and said, hardly audible:

"Lyonka, guard the gunpowder—there should be enough for your whole life. Give me your word that you'll never exchange it for vodka when you grow up. And you won't waste it over nothing…"

Wiping away the tears, I gave my word. Father did not die then, but I remembered my promise from then on: always be protective of the gunpowder, though I had already received my first gun at twelve years of age. True, I still went hunting with my father many times after that, taking notice of his ways. But, since the age of twelve, I had a rifle of my own, went hunting alone and shot with confidence, especially if I managed to fix my aim on something, and wasting was never even an option for me.

Nevertheless, I did not understand my father's consciousness. We kept our wealth hidden in a case under the bed and lived in poverty

ourselves – no better than the native Kamchatkans. We dressed the same as them – in deer hides – and shared a similar diet, mostly of fish. We did not even catch a glimpse of flour or sugar for several months. Yes, we could have lived better, and without even spending the gunpowder. But, according to the law, each and every exile had to bring fifty sable or ermine hides per year to the official in charge of Kamchatka. This made up half of our yield and, in this way, the officials and soldiers took advantage of us.

There was nobody to whom one could complain and struggling with the soldiers might lead to death, so keeping things quiet at home was the rule.

We lived in a settlement of exiles not far from Bolsheretsk, on Kamchatka. I was born there in 1756. My father was a peasant of the state and his name was Stephan Ivanovich Poloziev. Earlier in his life, he had been assigned to work at the Sivers steel plant in the Urals. In 1753, the workers sent him to St. Petersburg to complain to the Empress Elizabeth herself about the poor conditions. However, he did not make it to St. Petersburg, being stopped along the way with his comrades, punished by whipping and exiled to Siberia for life. He tried to escape from Nerchinsk, where he was supposed to live, but was caught. His nostrils were ripped out with some special kind of tweezers and he was locked up until death, but was later shown pity: He was a good blacksmith and such people were needed in Siberia. Only, the boss in Nerchinsk did not want to keep him, with his ripped out nostrils, and sent him further across Siberia. He also lived in Okhotsk, but did not become settled there. Finally, he turned up in Kamchatka, in Bolsheretsk. There was nowhere further to be sent—beyond Kamchatka was the ocean. So, father stayed in Bolsheretsk, where he soon married a Kamchatkan woman.

I don't remember by mother at all. She died when I was two years old. Father raised me alone on animal furs, taught me to speak Russian and, when I grew up a bit more, even taught me to read and write. He loved me very much and spent a great deal of time with me during my childhood. I also loved him, got used to his disfigured face and even considered him better looking than other people. He looked like a nomad: he went around in an old fur jacket with a dog's fur collar and grew his beard to his stomach. The idea of escaping no longer even entered his head anymore. He became thrifty and spoke out less and less. He seldom worked as a blacksmith and made his living as a hunter. He killed bears and wolves, but mostly smaller animals. We lived on these because father, being an exile for life, received no kind of assistance whatsoever.

Legally, I was a free person, but the children of exiles were not permitted to leave then. And, as heir to two poods of gunpowder and two rifles, I would, of course, turn into a real hunter; moreover, I loved Kamchatka with its freezing temperatures and fog. Plus, I did not have any relatives or friends anywhere else on earth. But things turned out quite the contrary. I did not become a hunter in Kamchatka, and I did acquire acquaintances practically all over the world. But I'll get to that later.

Our village of exiles was located a verst away from Bolsheretsk. At that time, the town was not large: It contained forty structures, a log church, a public drinking house and a fortress-prison. In the fortress lived the commandant of Kamchatka, captain Nilov, plus about fifty soldiers. And in town lived merchants, Cossacks and hunters. The walls of the fortress were wooden and cannons stood at each of the corners. That was essentially the whole town. Our village was small in comparison: There were ten structures including sheds. The exiles lived without any guards, as the authorities considered escape from Kamchatka to be impossible, and we thought the same ourselves.

All of the exiles, except for father, were former noblemen and had ended up in Kamchatka for speaking out against the Tsarina. Sometimes they were sent money and other things from Russia. But, just like us, they went hunting and caught fish. Not all products here could be purchased with money.

At the time in which my story takes place, four exiles lived in our village besides us. Three of them were former officers and one—a doctor, the German, Magnus Meder. Meder seemed to me to be an important person. He went about in round glasses and wore his watch everywhere. In autumn, he wandered through the marshes, collecting various plants for medicines. Not far from us lived another exile—officer Khrushev. He had a large house and, gathering from that, Khrushev was a wealthy man. In the summer, he dressed up like a real nobleman and walked through the village in white stockings and a silk caftan. There was still another exile—old officer Turchaninov. I feared him in my childhood because he could not talk, but only yelled individual sounds and waved his arms. Later, I learned that half of his tongue had been cut out in St. Petersburg for arguing too much with the Tsarina. At the edge of the village lived officer Leontev, a pale, unsociable man. He kept himself eternally wrapped in a blanket and seldom appeared outside.

Father did not associate with the officers. He considered his torn nostrils to be the result of some officer's 'kindness.' He always walked far around their houses and never bowed to them. Because of this, the officers

simply did not take any notice of us. Anyway, we had no need for them to do otherwise.

We had a small cottage, low like a coffin and built by father prior to my birth. We had a two-person boat—a canoe, which was light, like a leaf, made from willow twigs and seal skin. We also had a dog, Nyest, gunpowder and rifles. We did not have anything else.

However, there was one other thing: a book, purchased by father in Bolsheretsk from some official. With this book, I learned to read and I knew it by heart. It was called Upright Reflections of Youth and contained short stories and rules of proper conduct. On Kamchatka, these rules were of little use to me, besides the benefit of reading them. We did not have other books and I could not even imagine how much one could learn from books. Whatever I knew at that time was only through what people conversed about.

My friend, Vanka Ustyuzhinov, told me a thing or two. He was the son of Bolsheretsk's priest and, from his father's words, enlightened me to a portion of the Holy Scripture and history. But Vanka knew little himself and, what he did know, he already told about long ago. Therefore, we normally treated each other to stories of our own making. We dreamed about sailing across the oceans and walking throughout foreign lands. However, what we would do in these foreign lands, neither of us knew and Vanka's father, the priest, did not know, either.

I knew a great deal more about my homeland, Kamchatka. Native Kamchatkans sometimes dropped by to see father. One in particular—Paranchin, was related to my mother. He became friends with my father, gave him deer and helped him sell furs. Paranchin was a peasant and he spoke Russian well. He always turned up at our place unexpectedly and loved very much to keep us informed and to hear the latest news. First of all, from him I learned the Kamchadalsky language and found out many words from other Kamchatkan languages. I knew that 'deer' in Kamchatkan was 'oron,' but in the Koriakan language—'Elly Vukh."

Using words of old, Paranchin told me how the Russians had conquered Kamchatka and how they had begun to destroy Kamchadals for no reason, with no purpose. And how the Kamchadals and the people of Kurilsk then decided to wipe out the Russians, and suffered horribly for this. Paranchin also told me about the dogs that pulled sleds in the winter, about whales, about the loon and about the Telguchich mice. He taught me how I could find their underground stash of pine nuts and Sarancha roots. In the autumn we went after these nuts and sometimes brought back a whole pood. But, right then, Paranchin clarified for me that, if we carried off all of the

mice's food, then, out of despair, they would hang themselves on split twigs. It was an absolute necessity that they be left caviar or some other kind of food in exchange for the nuts in order to avoid such a misfortune. Paranchin told me about the volcanoes of Kamchatka from which, in ancient times, fire was taken.

Later, when I grew up some, I began to understand that the words of the Kamchadals contained many tall tales. Well, Paranchin confirmed that, in winter, the dwarf, Pikhlyach, rides around the hills in a sled, harnessed to white grouses. If you follow its trail, you'll get lost, freeze and most certainly die. If you should strike the trail with a willow twig, then Pikhlyach would appear right away and bring a silver vixon. However, nothing of the kind ever happened, though I brought my twig on hunts and struck the trail of the grouses more than once. Gradually, I stopped believing Paranchin and he went from teacher to friend. I was always glad to chat with him because my father was not much of a talker.

And now, when standing on guard by our door, I saw a harnessed deer in the distance and Paranchin himself in the sled. With a long stick, he was whacking the deer by its antlers and all indications were that he was hurrying toward us. I tapped twice with my heels at the threshold and waited for him.

But Paranchin did not look at me. He left the deer and went straight into the cottage.

I understood that he had brought some important news; moreover, as he had come from the direction of the sea. I went into the cottage after him.

A strong odor of deer and fat followed Paranchin. He took off his fur hat and bent down low to father, who had just managed to hide the gunpowder under the bed. Then he shouted a few words drawlingly:

"Quickly, Stepan Ivanovich, get ready. We need to take the boat. A ship arrived from Okhotsk last night. It's standing at Chekavka. We need to go trade some goods."

Ships seldom arrived in Bolsheretsk—maybe three times a year. And in the winter they did not come at all. Therefore, Paranchin's information was pleasant news for us: On the ship, furs could be traded.

Father shouted:

"Lyonka, grab five sables and a fox!"

I did not ask any questions, pulled on some new fur boots—right on my bare feet, and stuffed the furs in a seal sack to keep them dry. All three of us left the cottage together.

Soon, we were already on the banks of the Bolshoi river with our canoe. We set it in the water and father worked with the paddle. Paranchin remained on land as the boat only had room for two.

And so we paddled down the river to its mouth, which was called Chekavka.

2. The New People

During the entire autumn of 1770, rain poured down and it stayed warm. Therefore, the Bolshoi did not freeze until the end of November though, in previous years, it had always frozen over at the beginning of November. Closer to Chekavka, the river did not freeze at all. There, the tide came in from the sea and ice was not given a chance to form. When we pushed off, there was an ebb tide and the waters were rapidly flowing out to sea. The boat was caught up in waves and, before I knew it, the turbulent river's mouth and a rocking ship appeared in the distance. It was the 'Peter,' a government craft, and was assigned to Okhotsk.

As we approached the ship, father said:

"She's really been tossed about, poor soul…"

In fact, the ship's rear mast was missing, and long icicles hung from the side. 'Peter' was a pitiful sight, although the ship's rounded side rose high enough above the water. We went right up to the ship and began looking for a place to climb aboard. Father remained in the boat: As an exile, he was forbidden to board any sea vessel.

On deck, we could not make heads or tails of anything. The mast was broken and the icy rigging was tangled up. It was difficult to walk without falling. Off to one side, a sailor in a fur jacket was hacking ice away with an axe.

He noticed me and yelled: "Where'd you come from?"

"From Bolsheretsk."

He looked at me with a fixed gaze:

"Kuril?"*

"I don't smoke," I answered with seriousness. The sailor laughed.

"What do you need?"

"What do you have? I've got sables… Do you have any gunpowder?"

* In Russian, this word is the verb, 'to smoke,' but here it is used to refer to the people who live on the Kurilsk islands. Hence Lyonka's misunderstanding.

Sable furs took the place of money for us and I knew they would fetch a good price of the ship. This time, I was not lucky, though.

"What gunpowder?" shouted the sailor. "Can't you see what's happened? We nearly lost our entire load; we'll be sitting out the winter without any bread. And the ship just barely made it…"

Right then, he put down the axe and started telling me about those adventures which had befallen him the previous week. First of all, I found out that he was a Cossack hunter and that his family name was Andreyanov. He began to sail not long ago and knew the ways of the sea, I assumed, somewhat better than myself.

"Anyway, little brother, we were hauling salt and flour to Okhotsk for the Bolsheretsk camp, plus five more exiles to unload here. We went out to sea, the wind picked up from the north and we were given quite a stir. A strong wave lashed across the ship. The deck became frozen over. Chunks of ice rolled all over the ship like peas. The captain came out all drunk, only opened his mouth—bang!—his feet came out from under him and he broke his arm. He started getting up and fell again, breaking his leg. We carried him to his cabin and the storm grew stronger. We don't know what to do. The navigators, already in despair, are just arguing, but nobody is giving commands. I, of course, figured our death was near and started thinking of my parents. Suddenly—Boom!—the rear mast fell. What are you going to do? Then, of the five exiles, a strong one, a Pole, comes out of his cabin."

"A hundred fifty curses!" he says. "What on earth…are you trying to kill us?" We say, "It does appear that way." He went into the captain's cabin, spoke with him in a low voice and came out on deck with an amplifier. Standing in the middle of the deck, he yelled: "A thousand curses! Take down the sails! Turn to the south—There's nowhere else to go!.." We see that he understands the ways of the sea and curses no worse than the captain. We lowered the sail like he ordered. For two days we drifted. Then, on the third day, land appeared.

"Kamchatka?" I asked.

"No way! Sakhalin. We were taken to the other side. But everyone survived."

"What's the Pole's name?"

"August Bespokoin. He wanted, uh, to be dropped off at Sakhalin, but the captain wouldn't allow it. "Set a course," he said, "for the north."

August determined their position, we adjusted the load, and we crawled across the sea at a turtle's pace. That's how we got here."

I enjoyed hearing the sailor's story. I was already looking forward to how I'd retell it to Vanka Ustyuzhinov. I was particularly interested in the personality of the mystery Pole. I glanced around and asked quietly:

"And where is that Pole? Escaped, did he?"

"No, he didn't escape. They were all taken to shore under guard. They'll be transported to the commandant as soon as a boat is sent from the fortress. Nilov is going to give him about a hundred rubles for heroism…"

"Is he an officer?"

"A general, they say…"

Back then, I had not yet heard anything about generals. I did not even really know what they were. I wished to ask the sailor all about that, but there was no time. To secure a good relationship with Andreyanov, I pulled a handful of pine nuts from my pocket.

"Here."

Andreyanov took the nuts.

"They say he was taken prisoner during a battle," he continued talking. "He limps on one leg—probably injured…"

But I no longer had time to listen on. I asked in a business-like manner:

"Do you have any sugar onboard?"

"Not enough to trade for. I'll give you one piece. He felt around in his pocket and pulled out a piece of sugar that had already been nibbled at.

"The rest washed away."

I thanked him and started to say goodbye.

"Drop by again if you're free," Andreyanov said to me in farewell. "We'll be going through the ship's hold and maybe some gunpowder will turn up…"

"OK, I will. Thank you for the invitation…"

I lowered myself to our boat by the same rope. Father scolded me for staying on the ship so long and for returning empty-handed.

"What can you say – we made the most of our trip," he grunted and got down to rowing.

Fortunately, the tide was coming in and the current had changed. We rowed back quickly.

Then I saw the larger fortress boat, with six oars, pushing off from the shore. In it sat Cossacks and, most likely, the new exiles. I asked father to get closer to them. Father worked the oar and we began to catch up with them.

At the same moment, a canoe with our exiled officers appeared from the Bolsheretsk side. On the nose stood the tall officer, Khrushev, in a white coat with long fur hemming—the kind in which Kamchadals buried their dead. He was shouting something. We approached still closer and could see everything that was happening.

Khrushev raised his arm high and yelled to the new exiles:

"Greetings! What news have you brought us from Europe?"

"Who are you asking?" answered one of the convoy's Cossacks. "Can't you see? Exiles… How would they know…"

"Exiles…Hurrah!" shouted Khrushev.

"Hurrah!" the officers joined in. Then one of the new arrivals climbed onto a bench in the boat and shouted:

"Two thousand curses!.. What's this all about? We did not sail all the way here to be ridiculed at first meeting…"

This person had a thin, weather-beaten face and a light, overgrown beard. But his voice sounded strong. There could be no doubt that this was, in fact, August Bespokoin. During the storm, he had treated the sailors to his curses in the same way.

"Don't be offended at our gladness," said Khrushev when the canoe and the ship's boat met. "We are your comrades in misfortune. Sit here as long as I have and you'll understand our 'hurrah…'"

"In that case we greet you!" said the Pole, raising his arm.

Khrushev continued:

"What did you do to end up in this place, and who are you?"

"In the past—a Polish general," the Pole answered gladly. "When needed—a captain on distant voyages. And, at this moment, a prisoner of the Russian Empress. But I don't let others offend me…"

The canoe and ship's boat came together. Khrushev shook hands with the Pole and spoke to him quickly in some unfamiliar language. The Pole answered.

I could not understand anything from their conversation. I only knew that they were neither speaking in Kamchadalian, nor Chinese.

Their boats moved slowly. We cut them off at the nose and left them far behind.

Right there at our village, the figure of Paranchin was sticking out on the riverbank. He began to wave his arms happily. He helped us pull the canoe from the water and inquired about the gunpowder. Father gave no answer, leaving it to me to tell the Kamchadal about our trip. I did this immediately and also gave Paranchin half of the piece of sugar.

Father went home but Paranchin and I stayed at the river. He wanted, without fail, to see the new exiles and I had to show him which of them was the Pole. Soon, the officer's canoe was moored to the water's edge, not far from us. The ship's boat with the new arrivals went on further, to Bolsheretsk. Dusk began and the ship's boat entered a grey haze. Paranchin just barely caught a glimpse of August Bespokoin.

So that was the first time I saw the man who would play such a significant role in my life. From that day, everything changed in our Bolsheretsk. News began to crop up so rapidly, it as if Paranchin himself had taken part in its making. Our quiet life was shaken from its very foundation.

It all started at around noon the following day, when Vanka Ustyuzhinov burst into our cottage like a crazy person. He sat down on the bench, caught his breath and then jumped up and yelled:

"A school is opening in Bolsheretsk!.."

Further, choking, he informed us that the school would not only teach literacy, but also geometry and geography. The school was being organized by the exiled Pole, whose name wasn't August Bespokoin, but August Bespoisk. And Nilov ordered that lessons begin no later than a week's time.

From this information, I understood, most importantly, that the Pole could be, if needed, not only a captain on distant voyages, but also a teacher and, for this reason, his arrival in our region concerned even me.

3. New Affairs

Vanka and I went outside and he gave more details of everything he had found out about the new arrival and his plans.

Bespoisk had been a Polish landowner and possessed two names—Morris and August. He had been twenty-five years old when his family had taken away his estate, and then he decided to become a sailor. He studied navigation in the German city of Hamburg and was already planning to sail to India, when the Poles back home formed a plot—a confederation to overthrow the king. Bespoisk decided to join the plot, traveled to Warsaw, gave his oath of allegiance to the confederation and was given command of a cavalry division. The Russian Empress came to the Polish king's defense and Bespoisk fought against the Russians on several occasions. In the end, he was injured in battle and taken prisoner. He was moved in shackles to

Kiev and from there to Kazan—in exile. However, he did not stay in Kazan for long. Along with the Swiss exile, Vinbland, he escaped from there, having changed into the uniform of a Russian officer. He made his way to St. Petersburg to sail across the border on a ship. But the ship's captain, a Dutchman, informed the secret police of his plans. At night, when Bespoisk and Vinbland got into the ship's boat on the Neva, they were arrested and locked in the Petro-Pavlovsk fortress. Then, as punishment for escaping, a secret court sentenced them to exile in Kamchatka for life. Therefore, both of them came to us.

I learned all of this from Vanka, who had heard it from his father, who was often in the presence of Nilov. Vanka added that Nilov had greeted Bespoisk very courteously, thanking him for saving the ship, kept him for lunch and, after lunch, asked to hear his whole life's story. When Nilov found out that Bespoisk knew various languages and geography, he asked him to tutor his son, Vaska. Bespoisk agreed but, right then, asked permission to open a school for all who wished to attend. Nilov called upon some merchants and one of them—a rich man and tyrant, Kazarinov—promised to donate some land for the school. The others promised their support with building materials. So now that meant the only thing remaining was to build a cottage for the school.

"Well, well," I said, thinking, "A school—it's great. But will Nilov allow me to study in it?"

"And why wouldn't he?" asked Vanka.

"Because I'm the son of an exile."

"What of it, if you're a son? You yourself are a free person. Plus, the teacher is an exile, so why shouldn't you study?"

"You're right," I hurried to agree. "But there's another matter: How much will he charge for tuition? If he wants money, it won't work out. But if he'll take hides, then I'll shoot some for him. I already have two fire-colored foxes."

"Of course, the Pole won't turn down hides. He needs a coat," Vanka announced confidently. "My father promised to pay for me…"

Talking about the school, we walked slowly along the road to Bolsheretsk, and then we turned back. Vanka's father forbade him from associating with me so we met in secret.

Just then, we heard a train of dogs coming from behind us. Some people were yelling at the dogs and conversing. We stopped to see who was approaching. Soon, the dogs had reached us. On the front of the sledge, Bespoisk was riding, already without his beard, and in his hands was a large saw. With him sat an old, gray man. On a second sledge, two others were

riding. One spoke Russian poorly – most likely Vinbland. And the other shouted at the dogs and whipped them. I had no idea who that was.

The dogs stopped at Khrushev's cottage and the exiles got off the sledges. Khrushev himself came out to meet them and invited them in. We stood not far off, observing, and then I walked further with Vanka. We met another one of the new arrivals on the road and he asked us where Khrushev's cottage was. We showed him and he left, rocking and singing a song:

The fellow's rich, bought himself some boots…

We figured he was drunk.

Father was away from home most of the day. He had gone hunting and returned at night. He brought only one ermine, threw its stinky hide into the corner and did not say anything. I understood that he was annoyed over his poor luck and did not want to talk about it.

Lying down on my bear hide, which served as my bed, I tried, for some reason, to convince myself that there would not be any school in Bolsheretsk. After Vanka left, I decided that, whatever may come, I would not be able to study. I was just about to fall asleep when there was a strong knocking at our window. A soldier outside yelled:

"Ploziev, come to the fortress at six to work. Bring an ax and shovel."

Father answered:

"OK."

And he began to mumble how the New Year would soon arrive, furs would be required at the office, but they would not permit him to go hunting. But I realized they were calling on him to help build the school. So, a school, nevertheless, there would be. Could I really not attend?

With such melancholy thoughts, I fell asleep.

The following morning, father left for the fortress early. He asked me to bring lunch if he did not return during the day. That was just what happened—he did not return. I gathered some fish and dried bread and went to Bolsheretsk.

At the construction site there were about twenty people. Even the Cossacks were working, and the officers were clearing snow away. Soldiers lugged pine posts for cutting. There were only three horses in Bolsheretsk at the time and they were much protected. Thus, even logs were moved by people. Obviously, Nilov was in a big hurry to build. The fortress sergeant watched over the work and harshly scolded anyone who stopped to take a breather.

Father took the food from me and told me to go home. He did not like when nobody was at our cottage.

In the evening, father returned from work very tired. He angrily threw the ax into the corner, sat down on the bench and said:

"Well, brother, they're building a school, but not for us. They want five fifty a month for tuition…"

I started eating my dinner.

I, of course, did not dare hint at my desire to attend the school. Five fifty—that was about nine sables!

The night was stormy. Wind from the Ocean of Ice drove in snow and there was a howling, like a dog, outside the window. It seemed to me for a long time that someone was riding up to the cottage. I could not fall asleep and grumbled to myself. Father sat near the lantern and mended his deerskin boots. The huge shadow of a boot swayed on the wall and ceiling. Father was pulling a binding tight with his teeth when there was a quiet knock at the door.

"Someone's at the door. Could Paranchin—at this time of night?" said father, hardly audible. "Open it, Lyon."

I wrapped myself in my bear skin, went to the door and lifted the bolt. Two people in furs were standing outside. They quickly entered and shook off the snow. To my surprise, it was officer Khrushev and August Bespoisk.

"We wanted to see you, Stepan Ivanovich," Khrushev said to my father like an old friend. "While we don't know each other well, we are, nevertheless, neighbors. And this is our new comrade in misfortune—August Samoilovich Benyev."

Father stood up awkwardly and did not know what to say. Then Bespoisk extended his hand and said in a lively manner:

"Won't you come with us? For some important business?"

Father shook his head in the negative:

"I have to repair my boots which have fallen apart. And tomorrow I have to get up early for work."

"Really?"

And Bespoisk whispered something into his ear. Father looked at him for a long time, then chuckled and started to put on his coat.

"Lock the door, Lyonka," he said to me softly, "and don't let anyone in. I'll be back soon."

And the three of them left without saying anything else. Father did not even grab his ax. Therefore, I assumed the important business must not be far away.