

Forest Daughters by Sanita Reinsone
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EXCERPT

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MIHALĪNA SUPE

(KAIJA)

*I lived with the wolves for nine months,
and seven months with the deer.*

There were seven of us kids. Two brothers, five sisters. We were born one after the other, just kept coming. Father ¹was a workaholic! How he worked! I can't get the words out, I'm tearing up, I'm angry with myself for not being able to keep it together. It's because he worked so hard, took such good care of us. When our brothers, Dominiks and Pēteris², were a little older, they helped him. Broņeite ³and I were twins, we started to help with the herding when we were only seven. Then there were Antonija, Geneite ⁴and our youngest sister, Aldona.

We had a nice new house in Purvmala⁵. Father was given a new farm – eighteen hectares, but only three of them were cleared. The rest was overgrown. We had to break up the tree stumps. When I was in school, we'd come home after, eat and then go help pull

¹ Vincs Supe (? – 1945_

² Founder and leader of the Latvian National Partisan Association Pēteris Supe (a.k.a. *Cinītis*, 1920 – 1946)

³ Broņislava Supe

⁴ Genovefa Supe

⁵ During the time of Latvia's first independence, Purvmala municipality was one of Jaunlatgale County's rural districts. Today it is in the Pytalovsky district of the Russian Federation.

up the stump roots. The stump gets broken up, then it sits there for a bit before being put in a pile to be burned. That's how you made a clearing. We learned to work from a very young age. The first thing our parents taught us: thou shalt not steal! Thou shalt not lie! Thou shalt not bear false witness! Our parents would tell us: "The Lord in Heaven sees everything!"

That's how we worked. Each year we cultivated a little more of the land, until finally it was all cleared except for a few small groves. My brother Pēteris was an agriculturist; he was studying in Riga and was a good student, and did all he could to help our father. And though we weren't rich, we weren't poor, either. We were fed and clothed. Pēteris really, truly loved the land. When he'd come from Abrene, he'd bike around the entire property. Look for anything that needed to be done.

We'd sold pigs every year; we'd bring them to Abrene, from where they'd be shipped to England. I had to feed those pigs, and Father always took me with him to Abrene. The pigs had to be clean, put in crates. They couldn't be fed! We'd get some money for them. We grew flax, too, then we'd break it, sell it. Ours was top quality. Our milk was always high quality, too, and we'd sell it for profit; we also had timothy-grass, clover. We cured meat, made sausages. We didn't have a cellar because the ground was too damp, but we had a kind of cold barn, that stayed cold all summer. Yes, we did all kinds of things! We bought machinery, there was one kind of mower, and another, and a machine for raking, all of it so the farm was better. Pēterītis would say: "Let's clean the house, clean up the land, get everything set up, and then life will be easier." The house

wasn't trimmed or painted, but it was nice – three rooms, a kitchen, four windows in the main room. It had a fence, flowers. We hung up a sign that said “*Jaunais dārzs.*”

Mother ⁶was a great weaver. We'd buy thread, and spin it as well. I'd spun too, it's delicate work. Then she'd make linens and blankets. We'd bleach them in the summer, unwrap them across the yard behind the house. Those linens would get so white! During the German occupation we'd sew jackets and all kinds of things. Back when I was still in school, my brother decided we had to make our own Latvian flag. We had the white linens. He got some red paint and painted it. He had such energy! The things he'd come up with! My sister was a seamstress, she got the order to sew the pieces together. We had the red material, the white material, my sister sewed them together and the Latvian flag was ready! And so we could hang it higher, Pēteris nailed two poles together and hung it up so it could be seen from far away. Our father and his two sons, Pēteris and Dominiks, they put up the flag. We thought it was amazing! Pēteris was smart. And see, God called such a smart person back to him.

We, the girls, did all the work that needed to be done around the house. Weeded the garden and, when it rained, when we couldn't work in the garden or clearing, we went into the woods. We picked berries for ourselves!

That's how life was in “*Jaunais dārzs.*” And we lived there for a while until the Russians came and chased us out of the Purvmala house. Geneite actually crawled out the window and ran away! Then we moved to Aizgaliene⁷. The Russians came again. My oldest sister, Antonija, left for Riga. I wanted to go too. Mother started to cry and said:

⁶ Emīlija Supe (? – 1945)

⁷ The Supe family rented a house in the town of Aizgaliene in the Viļaka district.

“You raise them, and then they abandon you.” I took pity on Mother, and stayed at home. My older sister was a really good seamstress, she worked in a shop. Then Bronislava joined her in Riga. And I stayed at home and lived through everything.

When the second Soviet occupation started, people from the cities were sent to the countryside to work⁸. My oldest sister stayed in Riga as senior associate, but Bronislava was sent to Sesava. She worked there and told us she'd come home in the fall, and take back some vegetables to eat over the winter. She was arrested. Dominiks was, too. He was a police officer in Purvmala. They released Bronislava. She came home and found an ad saying a hospital was being built in Iecava, and that they'd be hiring staff. So she went to Iecava.

One Sunday, Father and Mother had gone to church in Viļaka⁹. We had a new horse that was afraid of cars, so they didn't drive with him and the cart into town. They left him at a house right before Viļaka. While they were gone, chekists came to Aizgaliene to arrest¹⁰us. Genīte and I were put into one cart, and our youngest sister, Aldona, was put in another. They drove us down one road, but Aldona down a different one. Our cart headed for Viļaka. It wasn't that far to the house where Mother and Father left the horse, maybe twenty or thirty meters. So now they're driving us past it, and our father had gone out just at that moment to harness up the horse. Mother was still inside. A man with the surname

⁸ The so-called *corvée* – forced manual labour that mobilized residents. Leaving your post was comparable to military desertion, and was punishable as a crime.

⁹ June 8th, 1945.

¹⁰ The cheka's interest in the Supe family was primarily due to Mihalīna's brother, Pēteris Supe, who at that time was in the forest and was one of the main leaders of the national partisans in northern Latgale.

Mednis ¹¹was also at the house with Father. The chekists see a man with a horse, and immediately jump down from their cart. They stopped everyone on the way.

We already knew it was our father. My sister and I got down from the cart. The chekist asked Father in Russian: *Are those your daughters?* We were so transformed by our fear that our father didn't recognize us! I said: "Yes, Papa, they're arresting us and taking us to Viļaka." Father had always said: "They'll never take me alive, never! They can kill me on the spot, but I'll never surrender to them!" I can still see it all so clearly. They take Father's passport. Both chekists had pistols as well as those huge guns. They tell Father in Russian: "*You're under arrest!*" And tell him to get in the cart. The one chekist ¹²turns away, then I saw it, Father grabbed him by the throat and knocked him to the ground. They start fighting, and the other chekist ¹³is taking aim at him! Genīte ran away as soon as the fight started. And I'm watching them thinking: "Am I going to let them shoot my father in front of me?!" I lightly pushed the second chekist's gun to the side. As I pushed it, the checklist fell clear over. Like a sausage dropped on the ground! Now Father is struggling with the first chekist, and I'm holding down the second one, his rifle still between us. He takes his pistol out with his free hand as if to shoot me, but I just push that hand away too. Then he bites me finger. And doesn't let me pull it away! I think: "If he's going to bite, let him!" But I keep him pinned down. Look, the joint in that finger is still a bit crooked.

¹¹ Benedikts Mednis (? – 1950).

¹² Deputy Director of the Pleskava District People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) Lieutenant-Colonel Fjodors Mihailovs.

¹³ Section Head of the Viļaka District NKVD Junior Lieutenant Vasilijs Belogubs.

Meanwhile Mother is screaming: “Jesus Mary, Jesus Mary!” At the top of her lungs! Mednis saw us struggling, and came to help. He helped Father first, and then me. The first chekist was killed¹⁴, and the second looked dead. But I looked and saw he was trying to reach for his rifle. I ran over, grabbed the gun, and took it across the road where I threw it into the grass. The grass was high there. And then I ran. Ran away! Nine kilometres. Mother had already run away by then. My finger was bleeding. I ran to my goddaughter’s house. I had a light-coloured coat on – it was covered in blood. I changed and left my coat there. I put on a jacket, wrapped my finger and went home. Genīte was already there. Pēteris was there too, with some other partisans¹⁵. They already knew what had happened.

The man who owned the house where we kept the horse had nothing to do with anything, but they burned his house down anyway. And arrested him¹⁶. The chekists themselves were uncomfortable carrying around two weapons each, while we had nothing. And they showed up like heroes to arrest us, but see, we managed to get away from them! It would’ve been harder to do so had it not been for Mednis’ help. And those mean people who judged me later, they said: “That entire house was filled with criminals!” And I say: “There wasn’t a criminal among them! And that man, Mednis, had nothing to do with criminals either!”

Our only option was to go into the forest. The whole family. And the Mednis family, too. And we, both families, went. We took some food, some clothes and blankets.

¹⁴ Vincs Supe fatally stabbed Fjodors Mihailovs with a utility knife.

¹⁵ Pēteris Supe had been active in the national resistance movement since October 1944.

¹⁶ Resident of Ilzeņu village, Viļaka district, Jezups Logins (1885 – ?)

And everything else that was left in the house – dishes, machinery – we threw into the pond. It might all still be there today, if someone hasn't fished it out already. We had beautiful dishes, my brother brought them from Riga. Some of them had stayed behind in Purvmala. The house in Purvmala had been taken apart and brought to Russia, but the Aizgaliene house was burned down after we went into the woods.

And we made our way into the forest. I can't describe the feeling. The pain, the tears... We took all our livestock with us – two pigs, one of which immediately gave birth to piglets, three horses and a dairy cow. We took the dog, too. We went deep into the forest, about five kilometres. We spent the first night sleeping under the stars. We didn't have a tent, anything. And it was raining, and we looked so forlorn. And we cried about everything that had happened. Mother cried, too. What are we going to do?! Father was also miserable. But we had no other choice! None! That's why I told the chekists: "You drove us into the forest yourselves!" We had been living peacefully, we had our "*Jaunais dārzs*," we farmed our land, made our home, settled down. And then we were chased out.

My brother was an agriculturist, each field had been numbered off. We had crops, enough of everything. We had it good! We did the same after we came to Aizgaliene. I've said it before: "You yourselves drove us into the forest! We didn't go into Russia and loot it! You came and robbed us!" I think, you know, all things considered, I'm glad I defended my father. I think I'd have a guilty conscience today if he'd been shot in front of me and I'd done nothing. And where that courage came from; I wasn't thinking about who to kill or anything, I was just saving my father. Maybe I should have run, but how am I supposed to run away when they're about to shoot my father right in front of me? How hard he

worked, how he provided for us! If someone had told me beforehand: “Mikiņ¹⁷, the chekists are going to arrest you and shoot at you!” I wouldn’t have believed it! I would’ve never imagined it! And yet that’s what happened. And that chekist dropped to the ground like a sausage. And I pinned him down so he couldn’t even make a peep! I had strength. I was a big girl, I ate pork.

So we started to live in the forest. We all hoped the Americans would come. We all lived and waited in the forest. And Father worked, planted potatoes, we were going to live there, if the Americans come and liberate us, we’ll keep on living there. My codename was *Kaija*, Seagull. I came up with it myself because I liked it. You know the song: “Fly, little seagull, fly far away, tell my friend that I am waiting¹⁸...” I liked that song about the seagull, so I gave myself that codename. Genīte, in turn, was *Maija*.

We lived there for seven weeks until we were turned in. Father was the first killed. We went into the forest on June 8th, 1945; he was shot July 27th. My father had gone to the edge of the forest to make rakes. Not to our house, but to the neighbours’. Our house had been burned down. Our neighbours were good people. There were almost sixty partisans from that town. They supported one another, took each other in. The chekists couldn’t even set foot in the town without everyone in the forest knowing where they were and what they were doing. Father and the lookouts were spotted. They shot him as he walked past. The boys, our partisans, saw him get shot; they cut down some osier branches, lay him on them, and dragged him two kilometres to the edge of the forest, because there was a car there. The chekists must not have driven in to the woods. Then they took Father to Viļaka.

¹⁷ Mihalīna’s nickname.

¹⁸ Latvian translation of the German song “*Das Friesenlied*.”

My brother didn't tell Mother that Father had been shot dead. He said that he'd maybe only been injured... But my brother had seen Father's hat, full of blood and brains, so he'd been shot in the head. And Mother didn't even know. She said: "Tell me, Pēterīt, is Father dead or alive, what should I to pray to God?" Pēteris said: "Just wait, we'll wait..." While we waited, the next day, June 28th, there was another attack. And Mother was killed. We still had all our livestock. And Mother thought that we could keep living there; she took two troughs with us to feed the livestock. Later, a woman ¹⁹who had been with us in the forest told me that, during the attack, my mother had cried "Don't leave me, Mikiņ!" as I ran past. But I hadn't seen or heard her. I would have stayed! I didn't see or hear anything. We ran out, we lived, Mother was the only one killed. And then she was taken to Viļaka as well. They took everyone to Viļaka, laid them out at the bus station²⁰. My little sister Aldona had to go see the body. She was in jail then, she was sixteen when they arrested her.

But see, I was taught from a young age; I trust in God. Pray to God. After my parents died, I went back in. I couldn't remember anything of the forest, couldn't find my way. I had to go five kilometres into the forest, and I didn't know where to go, and only had a vague idea. But I found our camp anyway. My boyfriend ²¹had instructed me: "Look at that tree!" I'd say: "There are a lot of trees like that!" "No," he'd say, "one has a knot on it, another has a different knot, and another has all its branches pointing in one direction. You have to pay attention!" I'd say: "All those trees look alike."

¹⁹ Natālija (? - 1946), wife of national partisan Pēteris Bukša (a.k.a. *Klinta*, ? - 1946).

²⁰ The Abrene and Kuprava crossroads at the centre of Viļaka.

²¹ National partisan Arvīds Viksniņš (a.k.a. *Jaunais*, 1920 - 1954).

After Father and Mother died, Pēteris brought Geņa to live with him, and I went to stay with the New Group. Pēteris had arranged it so he'd get new documents, a passport, we'd be able to go live and work at a kolkhoz. Genīte kept a diary. When she came to visit, she had a little notebook in which she'd written things like "Death to the fascists! Death to communism!" And the Latvian flag drawn on the cover. I kept some notes, too, but what could you write? If the chekists got a hold of it, then everything you wrote can be used against you. And, well, once Pēteris left, he was gone. He never came back. He was shot April 1st 1946²². The groups found out right away what had happened to him. The lines of communication were strong. Everyone passed news along to everyone else – not even a fly could go missing. Everyone knew everything. Though at first they kept it from me that Pēteris had been shot. They didn't tell me. It wasn't until later that my friend told me that my brother was dead. How I leapt out of my seat when I found out. How I screamed. Pēteris was dead... Genovefa and I weren't together, so we stayed apart. She was in a different group, the same one as *Kārlēns*²³; I was in the New Group.

Geņa was shot and killed on September 9th, 1946. They kept that secret from me, too. All they said was that a woman in *Kārlēns'* group had been shot. There were three women in his group. But they didn't tell me it was Geņa. Not until later. She, like everyone else, was taken to Viļaka, laid out at the bus station, stark naked. And my sister Aldona saw all of them – our mother, father, brother, and sister.

²² Pēteris Supe was killed by cheka double-agent Jānis Klimkāns (čeka codename *Dubin*) at the "Jaunzeme" house in Jaungulbene.

²³ Genovefa Supe was in the group led by Arvīds Svārpstons (a.k.a. *Mednieks*, ? – 1946). Vilis Toms (a.k.a. *Kārlēns*, 1925 – 1952) was one of the group's partisans.

In the winter we dug a bunker into the ground, where it was dryer. It was underground, and couldn't be seen from outside. We dug it out and flattened it; there were small fir trees growing on top. We sawed up some trees, created a ceiling. The ceiling was so high you could stand up straight under it. But when the floods came, we had to raise the floor. We layered trees. And you spread pine needles where you sleep. Or, if you had one, a tent, or some blankets. But if you bring a blanket today, and the chekists advance on you tomorrow, you abandon the blankets. You leave everything behind.

All kinds of things happened, all kinds. I can't even describe it. In the summer we had to live in tents again. That was nice. Tents can be set up and taken down quickly. But if there's a heavy rain overnight, you'll wake up underwater. Everything wet! We didn't stay in one place for long in the summer. You stay somewhere for a bit, then move again. When you find a really good place, you spend the night there. But then, for example, you'd get word the chekists already knew about that location. Then you had to leave. We didn't walk that much in the winter. On stormy nights we might take a detour and stay with a friend of someone, a relative. I didn't have anyone, though, everything of mine had been destroyed, taken away; so I didn't go back, but in the woods everyone shared with each other.

I always had to walk up front when we marched through the forest. My hearing and seeing were very good. One time we were walking, and there was a horse tied up somewhere in the forest. I motioned for everyone to stop. Then they all saw the horse. The same at the camp. We'd be sitting around the fire, and if I stopped to listen everyone would immediately listen, too, and watch me. What is it? Is it a spy? A wolf? On one of the

marches, when we were all asleep, I woke up and saw them – the chekists were walking right by us. I froze, didn't move. The boys were asleep. I only told them about it after. They said that, had I woken them, the chekists would have seen us, but they didn't, and just walked on by. But see, I had heard them. And another example, if you heard cranes cry at night, you knew the chekists were out. You could hear things from far away on a quiet night. And if you heard dogs barking, then you knew the chekists had arrived in that town.

We also ran into wolves. One time it was in the Vecums Forest. We were all sitting under a hazel next to a small stream, taking a break from our marches. Suddenly I heard something snap! Everyone asked: "What is it?" I said: "Listen, something's coming!" We all looked – a mother wolf and her three cubs! We were very, very quiet, quiet as mice. They came right up to us. I can see it like it was just yesterday, that mother wolf and her cubs standing right n front of us. The boys rattled their guns, aye! Wolves are afraid of that sound.

Another time we crawled into the thicket to set up camp where the wolves live, because the chekists won't go where wolves have been – they just don't think to. One time we crawled into a thicket and there was still fresh wolf scat in it. We set up our tent. The boys went out to hunt and left me, as always, at the camp. And then God gave me such a deep sleep that I slept and didn't hear a thing. You can't sleep like that because someone could just walk right up to you, find you, and then it's over. And the boys suddenly hear the wolves start to howl. They thought I'd probably pissed myself, but I was in such a deep sleep! They all came back to the camp, and there I am sleeping peacefully. That's how it went! We did that a lot back then – as soon as the wolves moved out, we moved in.

We saw other animals as well: deer, all kinds of birds. They were beautiful. I'd be resting under a hazel tree. A nightingale would sing, then a cuckoo, then an oriole. A woodpecker hammering away. You just had to look! Partridges in the lingonberries. There was a little hill not far from the camp, you could sit on it and enjoy the sun. I was reading from my prayer book, eating some lingonberries, just relaxing. There was a flock of five or six partridges right there. I was sitting quietly, they didn't notice me.

I moved the tiniest bit, and they immediately ducked under the leaves, out of sight. They were hiding! And then they'd fly away. I saw an owl sitting on a branch one evening. Owls don't see in the daytime, no, just sit with their big heads and eyes. And foxes, oh yes, a fox was up on top of the bunker once. The boys had set up a trap, they waited and caught the fox. But not long after that one of the boys was killed. There's a saying –when there's a fox around, it means bad news, death. The boy was the ones who had caught the fox.

We guarded the camp, and had several lookouts. I'd go on lookout duty, too – if I wanted to take a weapon with me I could; if you didn't want one, then you could stand guard without one, but it's safer to have one on you. I knew how to fire the small gun. But I knew, I always told myself that I'd never surrender, I'd shoot until they shot me dead. I'll shoot back, right through them. But I would never shoot myself.

I had face-to-face run-ins with the chekists about six times. They'd shoot at me, but I survived. They didn't kill me. Everything is in God's hands! The worst siege was in March, 1950²⁴. How they fired at us! Bullets whizzed past my ears, my clothes were full of holes. Everyone was surprised. I said I'd been shot, but not hit. The chekists and their

²⁴ March 24th, 1950.

dogs were everywhere, day and night. We decided we had to get past them no matter what. We ran, then slowly approached the road; the boys loaded their guns. Then we looked to the left, to the right, then quickly ran across the road. We snuck up to the cheka post. Someone was there! Three of them sitting there, huddled. One to each side. Then all of a sudden the boys were on them – well, shooting at them, at one, then the other. And we ran across the road. Whoever went back was killed. We ran, and the bullets rained down like hail. Tree branches were shattering, I heard them on both sides of my head. All the bullets whizzed past me. And we outran them. I was running in my socks, it was March. We outran them, wound up at a house, where they gave me boots. My shawl was riddled with holes, one of my coat sleeves was in tatters, but I was unharmed. Others get shot at and killed, but I was alive. When I got arrested, the chekists looked me over to see if I was injured. I wasn't! Not once! Not anywhere! How was that possible?

Ah, and when I think about what we had to eat... We each had a ration of iron – a loaf of bread at all times. It had to be that way. Those who had family left on the outside could get food more easily – like milk, or curds. Sometimes a driver we knew would tell us he'd drop off eggs the following day. Then the boys would go out, stop the car, and take some eggs. Good people exist! And we'd have eggs! I couldn't eat more than five. Just boiled. Some people swallowed the yolks raw. You can't keep eggs for long, you have to eat them quickly. We baked potatoes in coals. We had a bucket we used to brew tea from raspberry and currant pits, right over the fire.

One time when we had to run, I couldn't carry my bread loaf with me. It was heavy, and I couldn't! I tucked it under a tree stump. When we came back to that location, the loaf

was completely overgrown with green – it was moldy. We cleaned off the mold and split it up among us. That’s how we ate! We ate nuts, mushrooms, berries that we picked. Other times we got food from kind people. I didn’t go, but the boys did, they’d draw up statement saying they were taking a sheep, calf or piglet, so the people could prove that they hadn’t given the animals up willingly. And then, when times changed, they’d be paid for the livestock. And the chekists sometimes got hold of these statements. But I wasn’t there for that.

When my boyfriend and I were left on our own, it was easier food wise. But back then I didn’t have the kind of appetite that I do now. When you’re young you’re young, it’s easy to adjust to hardships and you don’t have that many needs. The same goes for bathing. When spring came, we’d get to bathe; and how many times would we be bathing, and the chekists would be walking along the other side of the river. We’d leave our clothes and run. That was in March. Then one part of the groups was taken out in Katleši Forest. There were about fifty of us total who came together²⁵. Two separate groups. We made a bunker, set up camp. And then the chekists were coming! And we had to run again.

We all spoke the Latgalian dialect in the forest. Because we were Latgalian! But there were also Russians in the forest. They were being weeded out of Latgale as well. They were arrested, stripped of their belongings, just like the Latvians. There was one group, *Sankevičs*²⁶ Group, which consisted of Russians. Oy! They were forced out of their forest, so some of them came to us. Many of them were patriots. Some of them were killed,

²⁵ A large-scale search took place in Katleši Forest, in the Viļaka District, at the beginning of April, 1946. Many of the area’s national partisans were forced to abandon their bunkers to escape arrest.

²⁶ Abrene County’s Russian National Partisan Group Commander Nikolajs Lomanovs (1921 – 1947).

others were arrested, alive. The groups kept in contact with one another. Not me. Personally, but our leader knew where each group was – where *Strongovs*'²⁷, where *Jaunais*'₂, where *Kangars*'²⁸ groups were. When one group went to join another group, you had to know the password. For example, a set of whistles. Whistle twice, then shout: “Daugava!” And the reply would be: “Daugava!” Or “Gauja.” There were multiple passwords.

There were all kinds of people. Some would drink, others would do something else. There were those who followed others around, who were paranoid. But the worst part was when your own people betrayed you. My youngest sister Aldona, who had stayed at the cheka, came to the forest to find me once they released her. She didn't come into the forest; we had agreed to meet at the edge of it. When I came out to meet her, she was sobbing. She said that the partisans, the men, had wanted to shoot her dead. But she had been spying on them! She'd been to dances and everywhere else. But *Boļšaks*²⁹ had told her she wasn't allowed in the forest. He said he'd pull her skirt over her head, thrash her good and then let her loose. He told me to tell her to never come back. Later, she married a chekist.

Toward the end we spend more time in the Vecums Forest, not far from my boyfriend's uncle, who had a wife and children. They were really good people. We didn't dig bunkers, but lived out of tents. They herded their livestock in the woods there, and knew where we were. They warned us if they saw any soldiers. It was how we did things

²⁷ National Partisan Group Commander Vinc Vancāns (1912 – 1950)

²⁸ National Partisan Group Commander Vladimirs Krasovskis (1924 – 1946)

²⁹ National Partisan Group Commander Aleksandrs Plešānovs (1912 – 1951)

– if I know you, that’s enough; we couldn’t know where you came from, what your name was, your surname.

My boyfriend and I lived together for nine years, during two of which I didn’t even know his name. He didn’t know my name, either. I only learned from the cheka that his surname was Vīksniņš. When he met with his mother, then I heard her call him Arvīds. I hadn’t known that until that moment, either. And I didn’t ask. And he didn’t tell me his name. We were just *Jaunais* and *Kaija*. He was very refined in all kinds of ways. He was a big reader! He had contemporary books, I read *Katōļu dzeives*,³⁰ and that’s how we spent our days. We listened to the radio. I was very good at knitting. I’d be given yarn, and I’d knit socks, mittens, and give them to the people who helped us. You could say I knitted a wagonload of things in that time. I really liked knitting. Crocheting and sewing, too.

My boyfriend had a cousin³¹ who lived nearby, and who had a barn. He had two cousins. One of them was in the Legion, the other in the Red Army. One of them, the one who knew about us, had a barn at the edge of the forest, and next to it a hollowed-out tree. My boyfriend had gone to him to have the radio fixed. That cousin told the other one, the one in the Red Army, that he’d brought his *radeja*³² and when he’d be back to collect it. Well, and that was enough. The cheka was given every piece of information, everything had been so carefully staked out.

³⁰ A religious-educational Catholic journal that was published from 1926 until 1940. It resumed publication in 1989.

³¹ Zigfrīds Vīksniņš.

³² “Radio” in the Latgalian dialect.

I waited for him a long time. He was always so punctual, he always came back at an appointed time. Yes, but that time he didn't come back.³³ I waited for him for two days in the swamp, but he didn't come back. And then I understood that he was gone. I took a few things with me, and then everything else that I could hide, I hid, even the tent. I didn't have anywhere else to go! How long could I survive out there by myself, with the birds? And the birds chirped and sang, and I chased them away, I cried, and they sang.

Later those traitors' guilty consciences got to them. At that time I'd gone to *Jaunais'* cousin Jānis, and stayed with him for a day or two. The cheka was already looking for me. They didn't know where I'd gone. Jānis' sister Bronīte gave me some food and brought me to the Žīguri station. And then I left. I travelled to Riga, and tried to figure out how to get to my little sister, Aldona. And I went. I walked seven kilometres to Annenieki. But they didn't call her Aldona there, but Alka, Alka! The town was all Russians.

Back when we were living in the forest, Aldona had left her address with *Jaunais'* relatives. At the time I didn't know his relatives, and he hadn't been to see them himself, but the cheka had instructed her to go there. She supposedly told the relatives: "I know Mihalīna and her boyfriend patrol through here; here's my address. If they come out, I'll get them new documents!" She had stopped at three different houses and at each one left a different address. So I had those addresses, and after he was killed, I knew where to go. If it weren't for her, I don't know what I would've done or where I would have gone.

I went to her house. I told her: "Don't tell your husband that I came from the forest, tell him that I'd been in Siberia, that I came from a camp." He comes home from work, and

³³ Arvīds Viksniņš was shot during an ambush in the night of April 24th, 1954.

Aldona tells him: “So, my sister came here from a camp...” And he, in Russian: “*No, she’s from the forest!*” The forest! Yes! I was given their bed; they put their mattress on the floor, closed the window, locked the door and hid the key under the pillow. I thought to myself: “Idiot! If I were trying to escape, why would I come to you?” I didn’t have anywhere else to go. They told me they’d get me new documents, they’d take care of it, I’d be able to live.

The next day they went to “get me documents.” My sister said: “We’re going to Dobele.” She said: “We’re going to look for work, and get you a passport.” And they left by bike. I stayed home. I’m sitting on the bed, praying, and a chekist comes in. He tells me in Russian, “*Hands up!*” I was under arrest, I had to come with him. He took me through a grove. His car wasn’t near the house, but a ways off. Then he took me to Dobele.

The cheka in Dobele was actually quite polite. They took one page of notes during the interrogation. They asked why I came here. What was I to say? I said: “To turn myself in!” And that was that. They called Riga, and took me there from Dobele. They didn’t do anything to me there, either. I had cried so hard, that they didn’t ask me much, either. And then at noon that chekist from Viļaka, Vinokurov, hurried in, or whatever his name was. Right away he pulled out a photo of my boyfriend, in which he could be seen shot dead. Really! And he was waving it in my face, saying in Russian: “I did this...” And waves the photo in front of me. I don’t want to curse in Russian, but I’ll repeat what he said. “I told him to surrender, you whore. But he didn’t!” And then “See, by my own hand, I pulled the trigger to put that hole in him!” I don’t understand Russian that well, but that much I understood. I still don’t know how to speak Russian, and I don’t want to. I saw that photograph, and started sobbing. And oh, how I sobbed! The other chekists were staring,

and asked: “What did you do?” The first chekist showed them the photograph. The others said: “You idiot! We could’ve gotten a lot of information from her. You should’ve told her he was still alive!” That much I could understand.

He interrogated me there for two whole days. Kept me awake night and day; I wasn’t hungry or thirsty. I mean I was thirsty, and wanted to drink, but they probably poison the water there and whatever else. That’s what the partisans told us. So I didn’t drink. He paced, hands in his pockets, and hummed. I even learned his song. Then he grabbed me by the ear and slammed my head against the wall. Grabbed me by the ears, head against the wall. I can’t complain; they didn’t beat me as much as those people I saw who had been beaten. Now I need to use the bathroom. He comes with me. I tell him I can’t go like that, can he turn around. He doesn’t turn around. “You trying to hide something, huh?” And I say: “What? What’s there to hide?” Then my eyelids started to feel heavy. He just talks, talks. Asks me all kinds of things. And asks me about things I really know nothing about. I don’t even know what I’m talking about. He made me sing and dance like that for two days. Yanked on my ears and hair and threatened to send me to live with the polar bears.

At some point they switched. The second one who came in said: “You know what, Supe, put your hand on your heart and tell us everything. Then we’ll release you! You’re young, pretty! Get your hair curled, and you’ll even find yourself a husband!” I said: “I don’t want anything. Not curls, not a husband. Nothing! I don’t need anything!” And he said: “They’ll shoot you!” “Oh! With pleasure! What do I have to live for, if my entire

family has been wiped out, and I'm the only one left alive? What for? So I can curl my hair? Like a little kid..." "Whatever you want – you'll regret it!"

Everything hurts. I hear that there's a political party that wants to instate the Russian language, that wants to come into power. I can't take it! They've been in Latvia fifty years, chewing it up until it's gone, everything was so bare, there were jobs, but you couldn't buy anything. And they say I'm a traitor to my country! I told those interrogators: "What do you mean I'm a traitor, I never betrayed my country! But your motherland," I said, "is not my country." That Russia was right next door, but why should it be my country? I said: "It was for Latvia; I was fighting for Latvia."

How they terrorized me! They let me go, wrote an affidavit, I don't know what it said: "*Sign!*" they told me. I didn't sign. They put a gun to my head, pulled on my ears, hit me. Brought me down to the basement and said: "If you don't sign, we'll shoot you." I said "Then do it now!" My entire family had been killed, I didn't have anything to live for. The cheka held me for six months. And then the Baltic war tribunal tried me for two days. Behind closed doors. It was packed with people! They said even the writer Vilis Lācis wanted to see what kind of bird I was, having lived in the woods for nine years. It's true! They sentenced me to twenty-five years.

I was very quiet. Both on the way to Vorkuta, and once I got there. I never tried talking to anyone. They all thought I was a nun. Yes! When I worked on the brigade, I was told: "*But I thought you were a nun.*" I answered: "*Why?*" It was because of how quiet I had been, I had barely spoken at all. *A nun.* My rosary was my most important possession. When other people got arrested, their rosaries were ripped apart, as was everything else.

But the cheka had me set mine carefully aside, in a bin with garters and shoelaces, and gave me a receipt for it. When I left for Vokurta, they gave it back to me. I keep that rosary on top of the armoire, along with my burial clothes. I have my burial clothes set aside already.

After a while, the high committee came to Vorkuta. They asked me how I was able to live in the woods, who supported me. I said: “Who could’ve supported me? Was I, a bandit, supposed to ask anyone for anything? I took what I wanted!” I said I took what I needed, and that’s that, if they were going to call me a bandit anyway. The committee had documents stating that I’d had five horses, around one hundred hectares of land, a lot of everything, really. I said: “No, there were only three horses. And they gave us only eighteen hectares of land.” And I told them how it had been. Then they said: “*She’s a victim of her family!*” A victim of my family! Then they cut fifteen years off my sentence. I spent seven years under a very strict regime. After that I had to live and work in Vorkuta three years. For each day I worked, they cut two days off my sentence. When they released me, they gave me a passport and said: “You can go back to your country.” I was happy.

I went to Bauska to my sister Bronislava. I looked for work. Went to apply for a job at a dining hall. They asked me where I’d worked before. I was afraid to tell them I’d just been released from prison! I said that I’d worked doing forestry-type jobs. “Okay, then come work as a janitor!” I was happy – utterly happy! Then I went to see the manager. He looked at me and said: “I can’t give you the janitorial position. You should work as a waitress!” I said “I’m not good with words, I don’t know how to deal with people.” It was true! I lived with wolves for nine years – and seven with deer. I don’t know how to talk to people! What qualifications did I have?!? The wolves didn’t teach me anything, neither did

the deer. I managed to finish fifth grade, that was it. “A waitress,” I said, “no, no!” “Okay, fine, then as kitchen staff.”

That’s how I started to work at a dining hall. I liked cooking ever since I was little. I paid attention to everything, I understood it, my knowledge was like that of a chef. I knew what goulash was, what stroganoff was, how to bake, how to cook, everything. They really liked how I worked. Soon they started having me serve the food. I said: “No, no, that’s not for me!” That’s a position where you have to talk a lot and have to serve the food. Then the restaurant could use another kitchen employee. The manager transferred me to the restaurant. But both the chefs there were alcoholics! I, Mikiņš, was the only one working. I could make desserts, everything. And again they tell me I should be up front serving. I said no, but what can I do – people are waiting in line. Then I started to work like a real chef. So you see, how lucky I was to get that first job.

They came to the restaurant to question me. They took me off the job, didn’t let me work! When they fired me, I went looking for the director of the Bauska cheka. He said that was the law, they can’t let me work there. But oh, the restaurant manager and chef had vouched for me, had defended me, said that I was the best employee and well-behaved. Yes, see, six they hassled me like this, I can’t even describe all of it to you. But I was a hard worker, the collective respected me, everyone defended me. Later they stopped bothering me.

I had brought an axe with me to Latvia, from Vorkuta. I thought that I’d have to chop wood – it’ll come in handy. I had to dig all kinds of trenches in Vorkuta, I needed an axe and a shovel. Before I left, I asked if I could take the axe with me. “Yes, of course!” I

brought a clock back with me, too. See, it's there on the table. It runs for three days, then stops; you have to wind it up and then it will run again. I have an urn from Vorkuta, too. I sent a lot of what I had to the museum. One of my fellow prisoners ³⁴lives in Lizums. She'd gone back to Vorkuta on a trip. She went into the Vorkuta Museum, and it turns out they had all sorts of information about how the Komsomol had built Vorkuta. The Komsomol, on its own! She told the museum director: "It wasn't the Komsomol who built it – we did!" And the museum director said: "Please, send us proof, send us what you have, all of it. Letters, postcards, if you have any." I had a lot of postcards, the urn and shovel, the axe and a knife, a spoon, fork, I had everything! I sent it all to them, along with two plates. We exchanged letters with the museum director, and she kept writing back: "*Thank you, thank you, thank you!*"

What I want more than anything is to be healthy. Wading through the swamp for nine years with wet feet – I can dry my boots here at home, but there we walked around with our shoes wet. We woke with them wet, slept with them wet. How often were we able to build a camp fire... It was easier in the summer, but the winters were hard. And now, in my old age, I wonder – how did I survive?

³⁴ Lizums District national partisan supporter Ausma Dimante (1931)

Forest Daughters by Sanita Reinsone
Translated by Kaija Straumanis

[photo1]

*From left: Broņislava Supe, their friend Malvīne, Antonija, Genovefa and Mihalīna Supe
in 1937 at the “Jaunais dārzs” (“New Garden”) house in Purvmala*

[photo2]

*From top left: brother Dominiks Supe, grandfather Aloizs Logins, Pēteris Supe
Centre: Antonija*

From bottom left: Broņislava, cousin Jānis and Mihalīna, 1938

[photo3]

Mihalīna (centre) with sisters Genovefa (left) and Antonija, 1943

[photo4]

Pēteris Supe in his 4-H instructor’s uniform, 1942

[photo5]

*Kaija (Mihalīna Supe) and Jaunais (Arvīds Vīksniņš) during a partisan march in Vecums
Forest, 1952*

[photo6]

*Mihalīna at the Riga cheka after her arrest in 1954 (from the National Archives of Latvia
1986/1/25488)*

[photo7]

Mihalīna (first from left) working on a road-construction crew in Vorkuta, 1956

[photo8]

With her brother, Dominik, in Vorkuta, March 1957

[photo9]

Mihalīna (right) in Vorkuta, August 1957

[photo10]

Mihalīna in Bauska, 2003 (courtesy of the National Oral History Archive)