

Synopsis: This book encapsulates author's life between the beginning of 1962 and July 1964, a period when he served in the Soviet army. Despite the story having taken place more than fifty years ago, he paints a vivid picture of the people, events and situations he saw there. He was helped in this not only thanks to the letters he exchanged with his family, but also his memories of those times which made such a lasting, visceral impression on him. Viks has said that he drew inspiration from the fact that the experience was akin to suddenly finding himself in a parallel world, his previous knowledge of which had merely been gleaned from science fiction books. Unlike fiction, however, it was all for real.

Excerpt

The room where we are being introduced to the wisdom of administrative record keeping is home to the human resources department of the regiment headquarters, with Captain Ostreiko in charge. Our classes are often interrupted by one or another of the headquarters' employees or one of the militia returning from a duty assignment or leave of absence, since only then could they could do the necessary paperwork. The importance of this location is reasserted by the relatively frequent visits of the Regiment Commander and headquarters administrator, invariably on a mission to obtain information on personnel, given that all the data is stored right there in the human resources department.

The only window in the room is, as might be expected, fitted with iron bars. The window looks out onto the main street of the village, which I have named the *main avenue*, running from south to east, so during the day, especially when it is sunny, there are no complaints about the lack of light. A map of the European part of the USSR stretches over

the northeast wall. I don't think such a map can be bought in the shops - this one is intended for military purposes, with even the most insignificant of inhabited places marked on it. There is a small desk with a typewriter to the left of the map. It would be cool to learn how to touch type on such a thing. I wonder if I will get the chance in the company's headquarters where I am due to return after completing the course. Although I don't know if they even have any typewriters there.

A strongbox is set into the southwest wall. Important documents are separated out and kept there - the key kept by Captain Ostreiko. The most interesting piece of furniture, however, is the enormous desk positioned at the very centre of the room. It is made up of two sections, two separate tables effectively pushed together to make one big writing table. On one side of the desk sits Captain Ostreiko, opposite him sits the headquarters' secretary, Sergeant Major Trofimov. From the outside, he appears as the very personification of accuracy and zeal. And on the inside? No, he doesn't appear to have a split personality. No, he gives the impression of sameness, inside and out. He is the real driving force here. He knows everything that goes on in the place. Everything to do with the work in the human resources department. He draws up all the paperwork - the Captain just signs it. Can a man live like that? But, as time went on, I gradually discovered a trait in the Captain's character that earned him a high rating on my value scale - his respect for communism.

The door opens and the sergeant major, *starshina* Minko enters the room. He needs authorization for a duty assignment to Kargopol, ordered by the Colonel.

"Kargopol?" – the Captain frowns, "Is Kargopol via ... what's that place called?" The Captain addresses Trofimov. The senior secretary flashes a meaningful look at the Captain, who reads something in his face and smiles.

"Via Jazma," the Seargent Major *starshina* obediently suggests.

"Only via the local shop," Captain Ostreiko adds in a stern voice and, frowning, turns to the *starshina*. "Is that clear?"

Finally, it dawns on the *starshina* that he will be granted authorization for his duty assignment, but only after delivering the expected item from the shop. *Via shop* has become an integral, widely used and unambiguous concept in army jargon. And there's more to it than that. The Captain is well aware of exactly when to apply it and when not. The main factor being not only the military rank of the persons involved but also their nature and characteristics.

"Yes, sir), Comrade Captain," *starshina* smiles. "Permission to leave?"

The *starshina* withdraws, closing the door, but the Captain gives us a look twinkling with a mixture of seriousness and communism.

"Can you imagine, he wants to go via Jazma..."

I gradually get to know the headquarters' personnel. Alongside members of the militia are civil servants, including cleaning ladies and even radio operators, as the transmitting station is an integral part of the headquarters. The station is obviously commanded by a member of the armed forces but I learn that one of the members of staff is my fellow countryman. Hurrah! I will have a chance to use my mother tongue! The station is operative twenty-four hours a day and I have no idea as to when I am going to meet my

conditional. I only know that this year he is to be demobilised. I haven't been able to meet Janka because his barracks are elsewhere – in the grounds of the first company. We trainees are privileged as our dorm is in the grounds of the headquarters company. The only downside is the fact that at any time someone of a higher rank could appear and make you stand up and salute them. Life in a regular subunit was far quieter in that respect.

Another privilege to being part of the trainee group and residing with the headquarters' company was that in the evenings we were granted a pass which we used to get to know the local village and its residents. The so-called house of culture was a club where films were often put on at weekends and recreational evenings organised. Posters would announce that there would be a live orchestra playing and an open buffet. The most important fact being that it would be open. The repertoire of films on show often makes you wonder. I recently even saw the British hit, "Laughter in Paradise". I will have to write to my brother about that. When we saw it last, together, at the "Gaisma" cinema, we enjoyed that masterpiece through and through. If we speak of dancing, I manage to overcome my innate shyness and experiment with the feel of trying to do the tango or Charleston with foreigners (albeit in the most simplistic sense). As it turns out, they do move normally after all and I must admit that it feels quite unusual to hold a girl's body in your arms (even if only while dancing, but should that be deemed insufficient?) after such a prolonged absence from the civilized world. I even manage to exchange a few words, although I am still not satisfied with my Russian language skills.

Back in the barracks, I listen to the men remarking on the fact that I've been dancing with a girl known in her village as a great singer. You see, and I didn't even ask her name

during the dance. Now, I know. Svetlana. I must admit her name matches her looks - fair-haired and quite well proportioned.

The men are in the mood for wisecracking banter (another expression from my *mutter's* lexicon). But tomorrow is not a Sunday and the *padjom*, or wake-up call, is due at the usual time and yet they just can't cut it out. The latest concerns the most effective way of stubbing out a cigarette – namely sticking it up a snotty nostril.

"So it makes a churning noise."

"And no fire risk."

"It's of particular importance in dry weather while mushroom picking in the woods when an accidentally dropped cigarette butt could cause a fire."

"Not to mention money saving, no need to buy an ashtray."

"You only have to blow your nose once in a while."

The day is growing increasingly hot. After getting something in my stomach for lunch, I decide to follow the railway branch line which passes the first company's barracks and further on past the prison camp. I imagine that I am a fighter – an F-86, who has crossed the borders of the USSR, without being detected by the radars, to gather information and see what the teddy bear has got in his tummy. I am certain that three years with the Russians will provide me with a wonderful learning opportunity. And I am even more certain that the most human weapon against tyranny, especially in the era of modern technologies, is the spirit of the societies in question – or, to be more precise, the *prevailing* spirit within these societies.

Flying at the height of an F-86 above the northern territories of European Russia, the air temperature has risen sufficiently to warrant the removal of the upper part of my uniform and shirt as well without posing a health risk, and for the first time this year the sun's rays touch my winter pale skin. No one can see me here - I'm already far enough from the village and there is nobody else walking along the railway line, that is for sure. Anyone else might give rise to suspicion here and be taken for an escaped prisoner. The military alone dictates the rules here and, with every passing day, I am even more convinced that the USSR is, essentially, one huge militarized camp. Look, another butterfly! The yellow one! That means we are heading towards a sunny summer.

The railway trail starts to bend round a curve. What's beyond it? Is it really...Is it really a river? What else if there's a bridge? You can't really call it a bridge, but isn't it great that in the vicinity of the village there is a natural waterbed?! I increase my pace and I am already on top of the bridge. Beneath me there is a slow, dark course of water, about three to four meters wide, its banks miry and overgrown. I can't see any of the so-called fishermen's trails on either bank, nor do I know the depth of the river, but this discovery fills me with joy all the same. Thank you, river, for appearing to me and presenting my imagination, which on numerous occasions has saved me from falling into depression, with a new challenge.

Lost in thought and relishing the invigorating caress of the sun on my skin, letting my imagination run wild, I have accidentally reached a spot where the river turns towards the village. The railway track is already quite far behind me; the flora here is not particularly exotic – sedge, hummock, bushes, undergrowth, but behind the bend my eye falls on a

pretty patch of grass on relatively firm ground. I know immediately that this will be my special place, one to which I will return as soon as I have some free time, even if just for a couple of hours. The bend in the river and adjoining patch of grass are so pleasing that I decide to give this place a name and it shall be – Santa Monica. It's the name of a resort on the Pacific coast of the USA. Can you imagine me, having my own Santa Monica, and what is more – where is it? No golden beaches, no waves for surfing. But a Santa Monica nonetheless! An F-86 above Santa Monica, Archangelsk region, USSR.

Our training course has shrunk to one human unit, and that's me. The rest of the trainees have returned to their subcompanies, I just don't know yet when the same is going to happen to me. At headquarters, midyear report preparations are underway and I got wind that I have been kept on thanks to my neat handwriting, with Captain Ostreiko informing the Command of his wish to send the midyear reports to Regimental and Army headquarters written up in my hand. To tell the truth, I am rather surprised at this as I believe the handwriting of the current HQ secretary, Trofimovs, to be flawless. But if the Captain prefers mine, why would I object? I wouldn't dream of it, especially as staying in Sovza is closely related to frequent passes in the form of daily evening walks around the village and visits to the cinema. Of course, the times that I work into the early hours preparing a large report like now, there is certainly no mention of any such permits. On such occasions, even the Captain stays in headquarters until about nine or ten in the evening to ensure I am adhering to all the rules and regulations. In fact, drawing up these large reports is one hell of an intricate affair. The system is rather complex, so the Captain teaches me all the tricks in the book for checking the correctness of numbers in the jungle of columns. I

catch myself paling at the thought of going back to the company posted forty kilometres or so further along the branch-line, away from the possibility of contact with the civilian world, as offered by Sovza. To put it mildly, I would not feel entirely at ease there.

I slowly get to know some of the local youths by name. Those of the girls - initially. Nina. Karina. Tanja. Raisa. All of them different, but they all like to dance and, naturally, not with each other.

Karina admits to not trusting the army guys. They all just wanted to use then dump you!

"Has that happened to you?"

"No, but..."

"It happens."

"Do you know anyone it's happened to?"

"Yes."

"Those are just the bad cases. That's obvious. But are *all* cases bad?"

"No, there are some good ones too. One of your co-nationals married one of ours."

"Married and..."

"Nothing. They are living happily ever after."

"Where? In Latvia?"

"No, he still has one year to serve."

"I see. And then what?"

"The wife will follow him to Latvia."

"I see again. It would be unusual if she didn't."

"I would do the same."

"I have no doubt you would."

"There is nothing of interest here. Woods and marshes."

The local lads are glaring at us army guys. We are their rivals and besides, in the event of conflict, they wouldn't stand a chance. There are several hundred of our boys spread throughout Sovza and the village is unable to put up any real competition. As they are well aware, our coexistence is peaceful. I must admit that I would be interested in getting to know one of the local youths, to find out what their inner world is actually like, what their views and value systems might be.

May is coming to an end and the season known here as "white nights", when it's still quite light even at midnight, is about to set in. How can you get to sleep with that? Captain Ostreiko promises that I'll join headquarters as soon as I finish my junior year in the subunit. I'm delighted about this as I have already adapted quite well to life here in Sovza and millet gruel no longer fills me with disgust, whilst the buckwheat one seems a treat you'd willingly have a second helping of. I should start watching my weight.

Yesterday was Sunday. I went to the swimming place with Tolik from the weapons' unit. That is how they refer to the widened bay in the river with the firm, sandy shore. I should write to *mutty* and ask her to send my trunks in the next parcel. Thankfully, there were no prying eyes at the swimming place yesterday so we just plunged in naked, although not for long as despite the heat the river water was still icy cold – there must have been lots of undercurrents. I am interested to know if it's the same river as the one where I established my "private resort" of Santa Monica some time ago. It doesn't look like it, as the

river where the swimming place is seems to be wider. I've heard people say that the area is full of small rivers and streams.

Tolik has a steady girlfriend in the village and after swimming I am invited along to visit her. While Valja is cooking dinner, I manage to tune in to a British radio station and listen to some news and music then, at the table, I am forced to have three bull's eyes and mountains of white bread topped off with almost a litre of milk fresh from the cow.

I shouldn't have. During the night I have to run to the toilet. Lesson to be learned: too much of anything is not good for you. It was certainly the result of the very best intentions and besides, I didn't want to turn down an offer the likes of which I was unlikely to receive again for the rest of my time in the army.

I continue to study headquarters' personnel. I already know that *starshina* Sergeant Major Filimonov is an accountant. He has his own room next to the human resources department, which is next to Captain Ostreiko's office where I am employed. The Captain has been telling me that there is a good deal of Jewish blood in Filimonov. Filimonov wears glasses and, in order to focus on the names and numbers, he bends right down over all his paperwork. The Captain holds his accuracy in high regard. "He will check everything ten times before putting his signature to it," my direct superior tells me.

The regiment's housekeeping is in the capable hands of *Podpolkovnik* Lieutenant Colonel Bogatov. I have no idea if his name comes from *bogat* – rich, or *Bog* – God, but this kind-hearted military man, resembling a docile bear, is held in a similar regard throughout headquarters as that of the Pope in Rome amongst Catholics.

The political department is headed by Major Majorov, but wouldn't Efreitov be a more suitable surname? No, Sergeantov. Exactly, Sergeantov...No Polkovodnikov. Polite and appreciative of discreet manners and behaviour in others, I have never heard him raise his voice, even though his status and position would certainly allow him to take certain liberties in that regard.

And what about *Podpolkovnik* Lieutenant Colonel Krilov? Virtually not a hair left on his head, a serious number of years on his shoulders, small in height, but sturdy, pretty broad at every point, should weigh less for the sake of his health. His nature? He takes his duties seriously, not a man of many words, but should he come across any sort of muddle, he is capable of short bursts of fury. An introvert. No doubt longing impatiently for retirement or whatever it's called in the army.

There are also secretaries working in headquarters. Vera's husband is the *starshina* of the vehicles' unit and he spends most of his time in the garages. The couple might be approaching middle age, if one can speak of "age" at all in this case. In the context of Sovza, Vera is an attractive woman all-round - with a figure, bearing and manner of speaking to match. A person well aware of her price. Well, value. I envy her skills with the typewriter but, in this case, the envy is white.

Ludmila is different. More heavily-built but sexier. Vera is a natural blonde but Ludmila belongs to the dark-haired kind. Ludmila's husband is a watchman. However, if we speak of sexiness or sexuality, to my mind, you need to differentiate between the visual and physical sensual aspect. From a visual perspective, Ludmila ranks way higher than Vera, but

in the same way as gold and silver medals are given for the second aspect, only men who have had the chance to sleep with both of them would be in a position to say. Is there anyone like that? What is the sexual life in the middle of Russia actually like? But Ludmila is quite an interesting character. Once she came to the Captain to sort out the paperwork for her leave of absence application, and while the Captain was poring over the data in the papers she came over to my desk to have a look at what I was writing, and the next moment I felt one of her expressive breasts laying on my shoulder. What can I say – only that the contact was not accidental, I am sure of that. An accidental touch is generally swiftly interrupted, it doesn't linger.

The mosquitoes have come out in force. Their number increases day by day and my walks without a trench coat are now out of the question. The local mosquitoes are different from the ones in Latvia. The legs of these ones are shorter, their bodies bulkier and they even fly differently – their flight path is direct. It is as if they select their victims from afar then aim and head for them, choosing the shortest trajectory and biting them in a blink of an eye.

The storm season is interspersed with sunny and even occasional sultry days. At times, Sovza comes under such an attack of wrath from the heavens that you are quite happy to be sitting behind the bars and double-glazed windows in the shelter of headquarters. The period of drawing up all the large reports is over now, so Captain Ostreiko, his right-hand man Trofimov and myself can all take a breather. But they say that it won't be for long as we have to ready ourselves to issue demobilization papers and the

drafts for a new intake in the not so distant future. Hmm, I can't quite believe that my first year in the army is coming to a close.

Grandma, how could I not think of you and your hymn book? Today, the Captain announced that he has decided to keep me in headquarters. Can you imagine, in the regiment's headquarters? Trofimov will soon be demobilized and, out of all the trainees, I am deemed the most suitable candidate to fill the shoes of the regiment's secretary. Can you picture that?

This couldn't pass without some sort of celebration, so Volodja, the second company secretary who arrived today from his subdivision to submit important paperwork in Svoza, and myself walked down to the shop and got the cheapest wine we could lay our hands on, as they say here, to "refresh our souls" at the swimming place. Cheers, Grandma! Yes, the Captain added that the Regiment's Commander also liked my handwriting. Now, the biggest task in hand is not to let them down, but I am certain I will have no difficulties there as I have pretty much grasped the tricks of the trade for a scribe and the Captain will introduce me to the finer points over time.

On our way back from the swimming place, not far from the House of Culture on Gagarina Street, I notice a girl in a greenish dress with flaxen hair. I don't recall having seen her at any of the dance evenings at the club. A slightly upturned nose, a proud bearing with a hint of independence, she looks neither right nor left. Perhaps she isn't from round here? Maybe she is on holiday, visiting relatives? I give her a codename – Randy.

Lately I catch myself thinking of my sexuality. Has it been enflamed by the expressive, firm touch of Ludmila's breast? I don't know, but I admit that in the above area I

don't belong in the hyperactive category. Sometimes at night I get the odd ... outburst of sperm, I don't get carried away with masturbation. I guess my lack of hyperactivity must be linked to the difficult time in my childhood when I was deprived of any maternal milk and by all accounts all I did was fight off serious illnesses, having overcome with difficulty life-threatening enemies such as diphtheria, tympanitis, entire bouts of pneumonia and tonsillitis. Of course, all of that could not fail to leave some sort of impact on the general tonus of the organism. Of an evening, the sole topic of conversation amongst the juniors is sex. I don't take part in such conversations. By the way, the news that I am to stay on has spread round the entire company in headquarters and I have gone up a good few notches in terms of respect amongst them all. This has increased my self-confidence and I am more able to enjoy this new situation. The juniors know what the position of secretary means. And those who don't, do at least have an inkling. From now on, anyone needing to do the paperwork for a duty assignment or leave of absence will have to come to me. Anyone with experience in the matter knows that the secretary can arrange for a certificate to prolong leave, for instance, for a full twenty-four hours. For a junior, who hasn't been home for more than a year, every extra day at home is worth its weight in gold, so being on good terms with the secretary is one of the main principles in the army code of living.

At long last I manage to get to know the head of the mobile radio station. I had heard that he is from Latvia and my co-national. His name is Bronslavs and he is from the Preili region. I've just been to his mobile kingdom, the radio station erected on a truck chassis, a vehicle looking like the American Studebaker which, during World War II, the USA supplied in huge numbers to the Soviet Union. Long after the war ended these Studebakers

were often seen being driven round the streets of Riga. Going slightly off topic, it comes to mind that guys returning from duty in the Far East said that Soviet Armed Forces, spread out along the Pacific coast, still used the American amphibians produced in the early Forties.

It's super cool at Bronslavs' place – lights flickering on the panel, music playing. When no specific tasks are assigned to him, Bronslavs listens to Western radio stations. I asked him to try and tune in to Radio Luxembourg, London W1. Sure, no problem. Indeed. Perfect frequency, no different at all from the reception in Riga when the radio jammers are not interfering.

Yes, Bronslavs has it made – sitting there all by himself in his private radio kingdom, ok, mini kingdom, but a man doesn't need much. The main thing is that during his shift, no one can reprimand him or make you do anything in the barracks. Independence, even if of a relative kind.

Varajan has a similar, relatively privileged situation. He is the headquarters' photographer. Varajan is Armenian, already serving his second year and at headquarters he, too, occupies his own mini kingdom. One barring access to all, since it is well known that his profession requires total darkness at times, especially whilst developing and copying film, and if the guy doesn't want to be bothered, he just calls out from his booth that he is working and not to be disturbed. I have no doubt that he often says this even when there is no film developing in progress, especially if he recognizes the voice of *starshina* Minko calling him from outside.

So, now that I am a fully-fledged member of headquarters' personnel, I also get to be on the list of special, or should I say, privileged persons. The Captain has spoken to the *starshina* of

the First Company, informing him that I am employed as needs require, meaning that when necessary I work longer hours and should, as a consequence, be exempt from the evening roll call, thus being granted free regime status. And that is not all he has done for me – he has also put in the order for me to be assigned the rank of *Efreitor*, as he says, it wouldn't look so good for the headquarters' secretary to be a private.

A small event: they say that during the night a special train with Khrushchev on board shot through Sovza. Officially, this Archangelsk tour its being presented as his visit to the local working classes and so on, but at headquarters word is quietly going round that this trip has an entirely different purpose. Namely, an inspection of nuclear arms bases in the north. What is more, it is said to be linked with the tense international political situation; the USA is said to be threatening to liquidate Soviet missile launchers in Cuba, and tension runs equally high in Berlin as the USSR has cut off all ground access used to date to supply the city's residents. In response to this embargo, countries in the West have set up what is called the air bridge, meaning that the inhabitants of West Berlin receive all necessary supplies by air.

Who initiated this tension? It would appear to have been the Kremlin, although verbally fighting for peace so hard that... Wasn't it an Armenian anecdote that said that the battle for peace would eventually come to the point that stone will no longer remain on stone?

All the same, echoes of this tension can be felt here at headquarters, also quite tangibly, since it is said that even staff members who to date have had no military status whatsoever are to be assigned personal weapons and full battle equipment. In honour of

Khrushchev's trip to Archangelsk, discipline has been tightened, the shop shelves stacked with goods, a few of the main streets quickly tarmacked and the embankment done up. So eyewitnesses tell.

So, another episode from Khrushchev's trip to Riga comes to my mind. When the leader's cortege turned the corner on Gorky Street onto Anree Barbis Street and stopped in front of a rococo-style mansion, intended for use as a recreational base during the tour, the Secretary of the Soviet Union Communist Party on getting out of the car was greeted by the joyful faces of those living in the building opposite, all waving energetically to him. He was touched by this spontaneous and unscheduled manifestation of exultation. He waved back at them happily until one of the local security guards approached their honourable guest and informed him that the building opposite was home to a venereal disease ward and there was no need for him to waste his time on that sector of Soviets. The expression on the party boss's face changed immediately, he did an abrupt about turn and hastily went through the gate leading into the garden and then into the rococo mansion.

Another popular anecdote about Khrushchev is linked to his visit to the USA. Everybody knows about his physical resemblance to a popular farmyard animal. So, following the USSR leader's visit to a pig farm, a photo and caption was published in the press which raised a storm of laughter. The commentary was illustrated with a photograph showing Khrushchev standing in a pigsty alongside some prime examples of celebrated breeds, the caption read: third from the left – the Russian prime minister.

At present we are not short of work to do. Loads of work, as my *mutter* would have put it. I have to do the paperwork for juniors submitting applications to universities and

institutes, and we are about to start issuing demobilization papers. My predecessor, Trofimov, has begun to pass files over to me, so I gradually have to get the situation in hand, grasp all the nuances. I still don't know a lot of things but I have the Captain behind me, so I feel quite confident. I am telling myself that it's going to be just fine.

And I think of my Grandma and her hymn book. It's going to be fine.