

Being Both a Judge and an Executioner

1.

The winter of 1941–1942 turned out to be cold. However, the Lemovzha marsh had not frozen in places. In early January, when Fyodor Astakhov was hunting down the parish warden and his brother, he accidentally wandered into the moss covered in thin ice, fell into a bog, struggled to get out of there and after he finally did, he had to walk, wet to his bones. In fact, he was not looking for the chief police goon, Vsevolod Klyonov, but his younger brother Petka, who had shot two people, not locals, from the loft of his house. The people he shot were either guerillas or paratroopers. They wore helmets and overalls. They didn't see any Germans in the village and wandered around the village asking for food. Like small children, honestly!

After that misfortune Fyodor got a chill, he was shivering. With a high temperature he turned up at his mother's. He couldn't wait any more, he came to her for healing and getting warm. He had hot milk and butter, got changed and lay under a heavy quilt, wearing wool socks, black trousers, almost new grey shirt and festive blazer. There were no other clothes for him in the house. He covered his mouth with a rag to conceal his endless cough. After the hot milk he was dripping with sweat. Suddenly Germans arrived at the village. They came on bikes

and cars. There were quite a lot of them, they came to find out where the guerillas had come from the week before. Fyodor jumped down the cellar just in time. He hid in the potato hole in his best clothes. The edges of the hole were fixed with boards. He carefully sprinkled sand on the lid. He felt the pain in the wound in his arm straight away. The shard had moved and caused a rare but sharp pain.

Several Germans came into the house with a sheep-dog and sat at the table. One of them climbed down the cellar and shone a flashlight. He rustled around the sand with a rake, he even got under the floor of the big room to the place where the potato hole was. He had to crouch down. Over there he couldn't really handle a rake. So five minutes later he got out holding a jar of gherkins and joined his fellows cheering and drinking at the table.

Fyodor had prepared that hole in advance for his mother to hide if they were going to burn the house. There she could have saved herself from the fire and waited. In the foundation from the river side he had begun to make a hole, he had already taken several stones from there and covered it with a sheet of rusty iron. It was not visible when there was snow and in the summer it was covered with growing nettle. You could crawl out of there without being noticed. But the manhole was still not ready. He needed to take a couple of stones from the foundation.

In the morning the Germans left the house. Half-dead Fyodor got out of the cellar, his face white and swollen. Even the dog had not sensed him. By the evening the soldiers had left the village. They took some people with them, burned everything in the neighbouring village, including the farms. To teach the villagers a lesson – not to help anyone. The local police goons, Klyonov-junior and Osipov, demonstrated their agility, they caught a Gypsy boy wandering in the village, an orphan, and pulled him out of the village, wounded

in his stomach. He was crying and screaming of pain. The boy was only twelve. Outside the village they finished him off and threw him in a combe.

"I am going to kill those skunks!" Astakhov promised himself. "For sure and in the first place. The parish warden will have to wait. All the village has seen those villains."

After the ill-fated home treatment Fyodor could not visit his parents' house. He only went once and finished the hole in the foundation. He also took half a sack of flour and a piece of lamb to his mother, he got them from the shed of a policeman who lived outside of Moloskovitsy. As soon as he handed them to her he rushed back to the woods, to his dugout.

Astakhov got used to his new routine. In the morning he would sleep in the woods until ten. Then, while it was still warm from the stove, he could cook porridge in a pot and grated frozen lamb in another. That was his breakfast and lunch. He didn't cook every day, he would cook enough for a couple of days. The most difficult thing was to hide his food from a fox that got into the habit of coming into his dugout. It had already eaten all of Fyodor's stocks twice.

Once a week he would wash his clothes in the water boiled in a pail on the stove, he also cut his hair and shaved with a razor-sharp knife. He had taken the pail, his favourite penknife, soap, salt and pots from his house the first time he left.

In the day, when the stove went out, he would pile fir branches on his dugout and throw some snow on the top. Then he would overturn a long log and carefully go across it to the bushes to the pathway, overturn the log again with the icy side up. After that he would go to the village. He needed to find out the latest news and get to uncle Yegor's house. There he could learn the news about the butter-making factory, about police goons, Germans and also about the guys who hadn't joined the police goons yet.

Astakhov climbed the red rock and stared at the landscape he had known from childhood: his village, bend, bridge and church's domes. The village was hardly alive. He could see two policemen in new black overcoats walk from the post-office. They were popping into the houses and writing something down into a big white notepad. Then he saw Verka Ignatieva walking towards them to school and carrying a big can of milk. At school there were headquarters of policemen from five neighbouring villages. Fyodor's mother was walking towards the Red Lighthouse with a can. She was ordered to bring fresh milk every day to the butter-making factory for the guards. She had to walk seven kilometres. She could hardly walk, she had bad legs...

Fyodor remembered himself coming to his mother's after he had escaped from captivity. She was crying and cheering up when she saw her son alive. She closed the curtains and locked the door. She put Fyodor's big sheepskin fur coat he had worn walking nearly from Kaunas home for more than five hundred kilometres into the hot Russian stove. The fur coat immediately became white of fried lice. She burned his blazer, shirt and peg-top trousers in a pot belly stove and got him some hot water. Fyodor washed the best he could straight there, in the room. His mother cleaned his arm wound with moonshine and bandaged it with a clean white towel. She got an old warm jumper, trousers and huge felt boots with rubbers, belonging to his father, from the attic. Fyodor ate cabbage soup without meat. He felt really good... His mother agreed with what he had decided to do here, in his native land...

2.

Living in a village, people get used to doing everything themselves from their childhood – carefully, neatly and for a long time. Fyodor knew all the hillocks in the glade near the farm house where they used to mow the

grass. He remembered every log when they transported their house from the farm to the village, on the bank of the Lemovzha... The nature only accepts people who belong to it. It doesn't tolerate others and rejects them.

The wheels of the state are different. They are usually there to change the nature. There are many people, a lot of factories and big goals. People have to do everything unfounded. If there are planes to be built, everyone must do it! If there is collectivization, every third person is accused of being wealthy. Every third person was accused of being a public enemy. If we were retreating, everyone was a panic-monger and coward, if there was captivity, everyone was a traitor. This machinery couldn't do differently... But Astakhov was on his own. He had no boss, no orders, no subordinates, no tribunal or power. Try to figure it out! What was to be done?

He knew what to do with the Germans. He had to act quietly and without showing off. It was war time and no villager would be curious, "Who is the hero who blew up the bridge or commandants office?" It was a usual thing. But everyone would be interested if one of them, who had always been living with them but had betrayed them, were punished rightly. For them it would be a triumph of justice. After that the other people, weak, faint-hearted and misguided, but not scums, as that one, would take thought.

It seemed clear. But Fyodor was plagued by doubts. He had new questions in his head. To start with, those were the questions to himself. Was he ready to be living and hiding in a dugout in the woods all on his own for months? He couldn't afford to get ill. Or be wounded. No one would help him. He couldn't stay in his parents' house even if his mother had tried to persuade him. They would know, sense, inform. How could he get about? Police patrols were hanging about the villages and checking passes. How could he look for assistants and soul mates? That was probably the most difficult part. They couldn't disappear even tempo-

rarily to commit sabotage. If they disappeared, their family would be killed. To leave with the family? But where?

The complicated thing was - could he offer anything to the villagers for them to choose to go with him? The Red Army had gone and left them. The leaflets thrown down from the planes saying the Red Army would return soon had a reverse effect. The new power was already there and it was acting roughly. The Germans were near, in Bolshoi Sabsk, just half an hour travel. They could arrive unexpectedly any time. Those were not just wandering in the village. They would pull everyone to the glade near the church and then search the houses in case someone was hiding. If they had a tiny suspicion, they would kill the whole family or even burn the village.

Everyone who lived there was entitled to think, "What if this country has lost the war, like Europe did? We were having Mongol-Tatar Yoke for a few centuries..." When wounded Astakhov and other captives were being taken in a carriage to the German home front, many people were thinking like that, "When they take Moscow and Leningrad, they will let us go!" That was simple force subjection and non-resistance, a type of conscience when people started digesting easily an external force command. This being said, it doesn't matter what force it was, ours or foreign. People were just following its will.

What could he oppose to that? Only actions! Active actions against that external force. Again and again he had to answer the same question, "On my own or in a team?" As soon as Fyodor returned to that question, a pile of other problems would spout up like mushrooms after rain. "Shall I look for guerillas or besieged troops? Shall I wander around the woods and wait for them? No! I have walked so long and never met any guerillas. I wouldn't just join any of them, anyway. I learned my lesson. I've seen a lot of them, wandering around..." The

circumstances demanded him acting on his own, without counting on any help for a long time.

What did the locals need, the locals whose children and husbands were already in the police and serving Germans? What did policemen need? They were all so different. He had to look for what separated them. Some of them needed just to survive. For others it was living. For people like Klyonov it was a chance of toading to the new regime, becoming rich and having power over people...

Some people hated the Soviets so much they saw Germans as their saviors. In his village there were no people like that. Now he had to make them realize that if they became scums they would be killed. They had to know punishment would follow everyone.

Astakhov seemed to become both a judge and an executioner. Who allowed him to, who empowered him, who had just been captured and just escaped being shot by the insiders?

All of a sudden Fyodor felt a clarity of mind, free from any ideological waste, army instructions and reflexes, everything casual and introduced. He was to report to his own conscience. Today he had to kill enemies. How well did his country do it? Did it love him or reject him? It was certainly important. But he tried not to take any notice of that. The most important thing was to drive the enemy out of his land. To drive as much as he could. To kill, harm and interfere. In doing so he would be helping his family, his wife, little son, mother...

Later on people's memory would start working. It would extract all details of betrayal and untruth from the past. Their imagination would form those details into living forms. After that their conscience would wake up. Not the false conscience of a slave who had lost his personality but the true one, which made people think, take decisions and act.

Standing on the rock, Fyodor could see his mum meet Dmitrievna, who lived on her own but policemen would often call for moonshine. Sometimes they would drink it in her house and carry on. While they were drinking, they would chat about their business, about who had got a promotion, who had been hung, who had been sent somewhere and who was the boss. That sort of thing. Every time mother met Dmitrievna, she stopped, said hello to her and waited for her to pour her heart out and show off her knowledge.

Near the church there stood an open carriage with a horse. People of Khotnezha and Koriacha were making their way there. There would be an announcement for them. "I wonder who has come. It's not Klyonov, is it?" Fyodor was dreaming. That one didn't go anywhere without guards. Last time when the Germans had come and shot the miller near the church, they gathered everyone as well. But then there were only Klyonov-junior and Osipov.

Two hours later everyone went. It was quiet again. At night he could walk along the road, come up to a house of a police goon in the village and feel what sort of person he was. Usually none of them slept until 2 o'clock in the morning. They all seemed to be waiting for something. Then he took his time checking the route from one village to another, back ways and getaways. To track down the head policemen he had to know quite a lot. Where did they go? Why and when? What weapons did they have? Did they have guards? The butter-making factory was a different story. Fyodor had already found out how to get there and how to set it afire. Now he needed to suss out what guards there were, where they were and how many barrels of oil there were at the warehouse. Besides, not far from there, in Sabsk, there was a German unit. It would be a good idea to get some information about it.

Around 2 o'clock in the morning or even later Fyodor usually returned to his dugout. He would fire up the stove, warm up his food and go to bed. The next day, or the same day to be exact, he would have a difficult day. He found out that in the morning policeman Osipov would walk to his family along the river Luga. He didn't know whether he would go on his own or with his mate Petka Klyonov. But he knew Osipov never walked on his own. He always had two or three guards with him.

Over the tops of the pine-trees there hung a huge lead canopy of the sky. There were no stars... Another minute - and the woods and the sky ran into one another. Snowflakes were falling on his face and melting. Fyodor stopped. It was quiet. No sound, no rustle. A tree creaked about somewhere. Then it was quiet again. Astakhov didn't feel comfortable in the ear-piercing silence. He was carefully walking forward, towards the road. The snow was betraying him with its crunching but the woods were extinguishing all the sounds.

About twenty metres from the place where he stopped two people with guns, in warm sheepskin jackets and fur hats were walking along the snowy road-side. Those were Klyonov and Osipov who had shot two guerillas and then pulled the wounded Gypsy boy in view of the villagers and killed him. Next to and behind them there were three other people with guns.

If only those creatures had known how long he had been looking for them! He had been preparing, watching for hours but they would be walking a different route! Then he would have had to run across the deep snow another ten kilometres to capture them in a different place. He needed them to be together and far away from the village to avoid suspecting the locals...

Walking across the deep snow in the tracks, both policemen were walking in single file. In silence the shot sounded very loudly. Klyonov fell on the ground

straight away and went quiet, but the second one must have been wounded. The three guards obviously lost courage and fussed. Two of them that had been behind, rushed to flee without shouting. The third man lay down and without aiming started shooting in the woods where Astakhov was hiding. A minute later he grasped something, jumped up and ran after the other two towards the nearest village. Fyodor didn't recognize any of them. He waited for the three guards to run further away, then he came up closer to the road. Osipov was half-sitting and half-lying unnaturally and trying to rack the slide of his gun.

"So, it's our people," he muttered when he recognized Astakhov.

"Oh, yes," Fyodor said harshly and finished him off with the gun-butt. He didn't say and didn't explain anything. Just finished him off! He didn't feel anything apart from a squeamish sensation of touching a rotten skunk.

He took the guns and pulled the bodies of the policemen to the river. He didn't want them to be found. But they did. The jacket of one of them swelled from an air-hole. When the Germans and policemen looked for them, it was the jacket they found them by. After that they arranged a funeral with honours and fireworks. Some high-ranked Germans came. They buried the two bastards at the Hotnezha cemetery. They must have appreciated their hard work. They didn't touch any locals. They just walked in line into the woods around the nearest villages. Not far. Just five kilometres deep into the woods.

His mother said that the women she met in the country road, Dmitrievna and Verka Ignatieva, shared their impressions of that event, meaningly showed their heads somewhere up. Their faces expressed both fear and joy, which they couldn't hide.