

THE SIXTH DIVISION commander reported that Novograd-Volynsk was taken
5 today at dawn. The staff has moved out of Krapivno and our transport sprawls in a
noisy rearguard along the highway that runs from Brest to Warsaw and was built on
the bones of peasant men by Nicholas the First.

Fields of scarlet poppies blossom around us, a midday breeze plays in the yellowing
rye and virgin buckwheat rises on the horizon like the wall of a distant monastery.
10 The quiet Volyn bends. Volyn recedes from us into the pearly mist of birch groves
and creeps into the flowery hills, its feeble arms getting tangled in thickets of hops.
An orange sun rolls across the sky like a severed head, a gentle light glitters in the
ravines of clouds and the banners of sunset flutter over our heads. The scent of
yesterday's blood and dead horses seeps into the evening coolness. The blackened
15 Zbrucz roars, twisting the foamy knots of its rapids. The bridges are destroyed and
we are fording the river. A stately moon lies on the waves. The horses sink up to their
backs and sonorous streams trickle between hundreds of horses' legs. Someone is
drowning, loudly disparaging the Mother of God. The river is strewn with the black
squares of carts, filled with rumbling, whistling and songs that thunder over snakes
20 of moonlight and glistening pits.

Late at night we arrive in Novograd. In my assigned billet I find a pregnant woman,
along with two red-haired, thin-necked Jews; a third Jew is sleeping, huddled up
against the wall with a blanket over his head. In my assigned room I find two
ransacked wardrobes, scraps of women's fur coats on the floor, human excrement
25 and shards of the sacred plate that Jews use once a year—on Passover.

"Clean this up," I say to the woman. "You live in filth, hosts..."

The two Jews spring into action. They jump around on felt soles, picking debris off
the floor. They jump silently, monkey-like, like a Japanese circus act, their necks
swelling and swivelling. They spread a torn feather mattress on the floor and I lie
30 down, facing the wall, next to the third, sleeping Jew. Fearful poverty closes in above
my bed.

Silence has killed everything off, and only the moon, with its blue hands clasping its
round, sparkling, carefree head, tramps about under the window.

I stretch my numbed legs. I lie on the torn feather mattress and fall asleep. I dream of the Sixth Division commander. He's chasing the brigade commander on a heavy stallion and plants two bullets in his eyes. The bullets pierce the brigade commander's head, and both his eyes fall to the ground.

- 5 "Why'd you turn the brigade back?" Savitsky, the Sixth Division commander, shouts at the wounded man — and here I wake up, because the pregnant woman's fingers are fumbling over my face.

"Pan, (Sir)" she says to me. "You're screaming in your sleep, thrashing around. I'll make your bed in the other corner, because you're shoving my papa..."

- 10 She raises her skinny legs and round belly off the floor and removes the blanket from the huddled sleeper. It's a dead old man, flat on his back. His gullet is ripped out, his face is hacked in two, and blue blood sits in his beard like a hunk of lead.

- 15 "Pan," says the Jewess, giving the feather mattress a shake. "The Poles were slashing him and he kept begging them, 'Kill me in the back yard so my daughter doesn't see me die.' But they did it their way — he died in this room, thinking of me... And now you tell me," the woman said suddenly with terrible force, "you tell me where else in this whole world you'll find a father like my father..."