SIBERIAN EDUCATION

‘Some enjoy life, some suffer it; we fight it.’
Old saying of the Siberian Urkas

I know it shouldn't be done, but I'm tempted to start from the end.

For example, from the day we ran through the rooms of a ruined building, firing at the enemy from such close range we could almost touch them with our hands.

We were exhausted. The paratroopers worked in shifts, but we saboteurs hadn't slept for three days. We went on like the waves of the sea, so as not to give the enemy the chance to rest, carry out manoeuvres or organize their defences. We were always fighting, always.

That day I ended up on the top floor of the building with Shoe, trying to eliminate the last heavy machinegun. We threw two hand grenades.

In the dust that was falling from the roof we couldn't see a thing, and we found ourselves face to face with four enemies who like us were wandering like blind kittens through the grey, dirty cloud, which reeked of debris and burnt explosive.

I had never shot anyone at such close quarters in all my time in Chechnya.

Meanwhile, on the first floor our Captain had taken a prisoner and killed eight enemies, all by himself.

When I came out with Shoe I was completely dazed. Captain Nosov was asking Moscow to keep an eye on the Arab prisoner, while he, Ladle and Zenith went to check out the cellar.

I sat on the stairs next to Moscow, opposite the frightened prisoner, who kept trying to communicate something. Moscow wasn't listening to him, he was sleepy and tired, as we all were. As soon as the Captain turned his back, Moscow pulled out his pistol – an Austrian Glock, one of his trophies – and, with an arrogant leer, shot the prisoner in the head and chest.

The Captain turned round, and looked at him pityingly without saying a word.

Moscow closed his eyes as he sat down beside the dead man, overcome with exhaustion.

Looking at all of us as if he were meeting us for the first time, the Captain said:

'This is too much. Everyone into the cars! We're going for a rest, behind the lines.'

One after another, like zombies, we trooped off towards our vehicles. My head was so heavy I was sure that if I stopped it would explode.

We went back behind the lines, into the area controlled and defended by our infantry. We fell asleep instantly; I didn't even have time to take off my jacket and ammunition belt before I fell into the darkness, like a dead man.

Soon afterwards Moscow woke me by hammering the butt of his Kalashnikov on my jacket, at chest level. Slowly

and reluctantly I opened my eyes and looked around; I struggled to remember where I was. I couldn't get things into focus.

Moscow's face looked tired; he was chewing a piece of bread. Outside it was dark; it was impossible to tell what time it was. I looked at my watch but couldn't see the digits; everything was hazy.

'What's happening? How long have we slept?' I asked Moscow in a weary voice.

'We haven't slept at all, brother . . . And I think we're going to have to stay awake quite a while longer.'

I clasped my face between my hands, trying to muster the strength to stand up and arrange my thoughts. I needed to sleep, I was exhausted. My trousers were dirty and wet, my jacket smelled of sweat and fresh earth. I was worn out.

Moscow went to wake the others:

'Come on, lads, we're leaving immediately . . . We're needed.'

They were all in despair; they didn't want to get up. But, grumbling and cursing, they struggled to their feet.

Captain Nosov was pacing around with the handset to his ear, and an infantryman was following him around like a pet dog, with the field radio in his rucksack. The Captain was angry; he kept repeating to somebody or other, over the radio, that it was the first break we'd taken in three days, and that we were at the end of our tether. It was all in vain, because eventually Nosov said, in a clipped tone:

'Yes, Comrade Colonel! Confirmed! Order received!'

They were sending us back to the front line.

I didn't even want to think about it.

I went over to a metal tank full of water. I dipped my hands into it: the water was very cool; it made me shiver slightly. I put my whole head into the drum, right under the water, and kept it there for a while, holding my breath.

I opened my eyes inside the tank and saw complete darkness. Alarmed, I jerked my head out, gasping for air.

The darkness I'd seen in the tank had shocked me. Death might be just like that, I thought: dark and airless.

I leaned over the tank and watched, shimmering on the water, the reflection of my face, and of my life up to that moment.

THE EIGHT-TRIANGLED HAT AND THE FLICK-KNIFE

In Transnistria February is the coldest month of the year. The wind blows hard, the air becomes keen and stings your face. On the street people wrap themselves up like mummies; the children look like plump little dolls, bundled up in countless layers of clothes, with scarves up to their eyes.

It usually snows a lot; the days are short and darkness descends very early.

That was the month when I was born. Early, coming out feet first; I was so weak that in ancient Sparta I would undoubtedly have been left to die because of my physical condition. Instead they put me in an incubator.

A kindly nurse told my mother she would have to get used to the idea that I wouldn't live long. My mother

cried, expressing her milk with a breast pump to take to me in the incubator. It can't have been a happy time for her.

From my birth onwards, perhaps out of habit, I continued to be a source of worry and distress to my parents (or rather to my mother, because my father didn't really care about anything: he went on with his life as a criminal, robbing banks and spending a lot of time in prison). I've lost count of the number of scrapes I got into when I was small. But it was natural: I grew up in a rough district – the place where the criminals expelled from Siberia were re-settled in the 1930s. My life was there, in Bender, with the criminals, and the people of our villainous district were like one big family.

When I was small I didn't care about toys. What I liked doing when I was four or five was prowling round the house to see if my grandfather or my uncle were taking their weapons apart to clean them. They were constantly doing it, with the utmost care and devotion. My uncle used to say weapons were like women – if you didn't caress them enough they'd grow stiff and betray you.

The weapons in our house, as in all Siberian houses, were kept in particular places. The so-called 'personal' guns – the ones Siberian criminals carry around with them and use every day – are placed in the 'red corner', where the family icons hang on the walls, along with the photographs of relatives who have died or are serving prison sentences. Below the icons and the photographs

there is a shelf, draped with a piece of red cloth, on which there are usually about a dozen Siberian crucifixes. Whenever a criminal enters the house he goes straight to the red corner, pulls out his gun and puts it on the shelf, then crosses himself and places a crucifix over the gun. This is an ancient tradition which ensures that weapons are never used in a Siberian house: if they were, the house could never be lived in again. The crucifix acts as a kind of seal, which can only be removed when the criminal leaves the house.

The personal guns, which are called 'lovers', 'aunts', 'trunks' or 'ropes', don't usually have any deeper meaning; they are seen as just weapons, nothing more. They are not cult objects, in the way that the 'pike', the traditional knife, is. The gun is simply a tool of the trade.

In addition to personal guns, there are other kinds of weapon that are kept around the house. The weapons of Siberian criminals fall into two broad categories: 'honest' ones and 'sinful' ones. The 'honest' weapons are those that are used only for hunting in the woods. According to Siberian morality, hunting is a purification ritual, which enables a person to return to the state of primal innocence in which God created man. Siberians never hunt for pleasure, but only to satisfy their hunger, and only when they go into the dense woods of their homeland, the Tayga. Never in places where food can be obtained without killing wild animals. If they are out in the woods for a week the Siberians will usually kill only one boar; for the rest of the time they just walk. In hunting there is no place for self-interest, only for survival. This doctrine influences the entire Siberian criminal law, forming a moral basis which

prescribes humility and simplicity in the actions of each individual criminal, and respect for the freedom of every living thing.

The 'honest' weapons used for hunting are kept in a special area of the house, called the 'altar', along with the decorated hunting belts of the masters of the house and their forefathers. There are always hunting knives hanging from the belts, and bags containing various talismans and objects of pagan magic.

The 'sinful' weapons are those that are used for criminal purposes. These weapons are usually kept in the cellar and in various hiding places scattered around the yard. Every sinful weapon is engraved with the image of a cross or a patron saint, and has been 'baptized' in a Siberian church.

Kalashnikov assault rifles are the Siberians' favourites. In criminal slang each model has a name; no one uses abbreviations or numbers to indicate the model and calibre or the type of ammunition it requires. For example, the old 7.62 mm AK-47 is called a 'saw', and its ammunition 'heads'. The more recent 5.45 mm AKS with the folding butt is called a 'telescope', and its ammunition 'chips'. There are also names for the different types of cartridge: the bottom-heavy ones with black tips are called 'fat ones'; the armour-piercing ones with white tips, 'nails'; the explosive ones with red and white tips, 'sparks'.

The same goes for the other weapons: precision rifles are called 'fishing rods', or 'scythes'. If they have a built-in silencer on the barrel, they are called 'whips'. Silencers are called 'boots', 'terminals' or 'woodcocks'.

According to tradition, an honest weapon and a

sinful one cannot remain in the same room, otherwise the honest weapon is forever contaminated, and can never be used again, because its use would bring bad luck on the whole family. In this case the gun must be eliminated with a special ritual. It is buried in the ground, wrapped in a sheet on which a mother has given birth. According to Siberian beliefs, everything connected with childbirth is charged with positive energy, because every newborn child is pure and does not know sin. So the powers of purity are a kind of seal against misfortune. On the spot where a contaminated weapon has been buried it is usual to plant a tree, so that if the 'curse' strikes, it will destroy the tree and not spread to anything else.

In my parents' house there were weapons everywhere; my grandfather had a whole room full of honest weapons: rifles of various calibres and makes, numerous knives and various kinds of ammunition. I could only go into that room if I was accompanied by an adult, and when I did I tried to stay there as long as possible. I would hold the weapons, study their details, ask hundreds of questions, until they would stop me, saying:

'That's enough questions! Just wait a while. When you grow up you'll be able to try them out for yourself . . .'

Needless to say, I couldn't wait to grow up.

I would watch spellbound as my grandfather and my uncle handled the weapons, and when I touched them they seemed to me like living creatures.

Grandfather would often call me and sit me down in front of him; then he would lay on the table an old Tokarev – a handsome, powerful pistol, which seemed to me more fascinating than all the weapons in existence.

'Well? Do you see this?' he would say. 'This is no ordinary gun. It's magic. If a cop comes near, it'll shoot him of its own accord, without you pulling the trigger . . .'

I really believed in the powers of that pistol, and once, when the police arrived at our house to carry out a raid, I did a very stupid thing.

That day my father had returned from a long stay in central Russia, where he had robbed a number of security vans. After supper, to which my whole family and a few close friends had come, the men were sitting at the table, talking and discussing various criminal matters, and the women were in the kitchen, washing the dishes, singing Siberian songs and laughing together as they swapped stories from the past. I was sitting next to my grandfather on the bench, with a cup of hot tea in my hand, listening to what the grown-ups were saying. Unlike other communities, the Siberians respect children, and will talk freely about any subject in front of them, without creating an air of mystery or prohibition.

Suddenly I heard the women screaming, and then a lot of angry voices: within seconds the house was full of armed police, their faces covered, pointing Kalashnikovs at us. One of them came over to my grandfather, pushed the rifle in his face and shouted furiously, the tension in his voice unmistakable:

'What are you looking at, you old fool? I told you to keep your eyes on the floor!'

I wasn't in the least scared. None of those men frightened me – the fact of being with my whole family made me feel stronger. But the tone in which the man had addressed my grandfather had angered me. After a short pause, my grandfather, not looking the policeman in the eye but holding his head erect, called out to my grandmother:

'Svetlana! Svetlana! Come in here, darling! I want you to pass on a few words to this scum!'

According to the rules of criminal behaviour, Siberian men cannot communicate with policemen. It is forbidden to address them, answer their questions or establish any relationship with them. The criminal must behave as if the police were not there, and use the mediation of a female relative, or friend of the family, provided she is of Siberian origin. The criminal tells the woman what he wants to say to the policeman in the criminal language, and she repeats his words in Russian, even though the policeman can hear what he says perfectly well, since he is standing there in front of him. Then, when the policeman replies, the woman turns round and translates his words into the criminal language. The criminal must not look the policeman in the face, and if he refers to him in the course of his speech he must use derogatory words like 'filth', 'dog', 'rabbit', 'rat', 'bastard', 'abortion', etc.

That evening the oldest person in the room was my grandfather, so according to the rules of criminal behaviour the right to communicate was his; the others had to keep silent, and if they wanted to say anything they would have to ask his permission. My grandfather was well known for his skill in dealing with tense situations.

My grandmother came in from the kitchen, with a coloured duster in her hand. She was followed by my mother, who was looking extremely worried.

'My dear wife – God bless you – please tell this piece of filth that for as long as I'm alive no one is going to point weapons at my face or those of my friends in my house . . . Ask him what he wants, and tell him to order his men to lower their guns for the love of Christ before somebody gets hurt.'

My grandmother started repeating what my grandfather had said to the policeman, and although the man nodded to indicate that he had heard every word, she went on, following the tradition through to the end. There was something false, something theatrical about all this, but it was a scene that had to be acted out; it was a question of criminal dignity.

'Everyone on the floor, face down. We have a warrant for the arrest of . . .' The policeman didn't manage to finish his sentence, because my grandfather, with a broad and slightly malicious smile – which in fact was the way he always smiled – interrupted him, addressing my grandmother:

'By the passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who died and rose again for us sinners! Svetlana, my love, ask this stupid cop if she and her friends are from Japan.'

My grandfather was humiliating the police by speaking about them as if they were women. All the other criminals laughed. Meanwhile my grandfather went on:

'They don't look Japanese to me, so they can't be kamikazes . . . Why, then, do they come armed into the heart of Low River, into the home of an honest criminal,

while he is sharing a few moments of happiness with other good people?'

My grandfather's speech was turning into what the criminals call 'song' – that extreme form of communication with policemen where a criminal speaks as if he were thinking out loud, talking to himself. He was merely expressing his own thoughts, not deigning to answer questions or establish any contact. That is the normal procedure when someone wants to indicate to policemen that what he is saying is the only truth, that there is no room for doubt.

'Why do I see all these dishonest people with covered faces? Why do they come here to dishonour my home and the good faith of my family and my guests? Here, in our land of simple, humble people, servants of Our Lord and of the Siberian Orthodox Mother Church, why do these gobs of Satan's spit come to afflict the hearts of our beloved women and our dear children?'

In the meantime another policeman had dashed into the room and addressed his superior:

'Comrade Captain, allow me to speak!'

'Go ahead,' replied a small, stocky man, in a voice that seemed to come from beyond the grave. His rifle was aimed at the back of my father's head. My father, with a sardonic smile, went on sipping his tea and crunching my mother's home-made walnut biscuits.

'There are crowds of armed men outside. They've blocked off all the roads and have taken hostage the patrol that was guarding the vehicles!'

Silence fell in the room – a long, heavy silence. Only two sounds could be heard: the crunch of my father's

teeth on the biscuits and the wheezing of Uncle Vitaly's lungs.

I looked at the eyes of a policeman who was standing next to me; through the holes in his hood I could see he was sweaty and pale. His face reminded me of that of a corpse I had seen a few months earlier, after it had been fished out of the river by my friends: its skin was all white with black veins, its eyes like two deep, murky pits. There had also been a hole in the dead man's forehead where he had been shot. Well, this policeman didn't have a hole in his head, but I reckon both he and I were thinking exactly the same thing: that before very long he was going to have one.

Suddenly the front door opened and, pushing aside the policeman who had just delivered his chilling report, six armed men, friends of my father and my grandfather, entered the room, one after the other. The first was Uncle Plank, who was also the Guardian of our area; the others were his closest associates. My grandfather, completely ignoring the presence of the policemen, got to his feet and went over to Plank.

'By Holy Christ and all His blessed family!' said Plank, embracing my grandfather and shaking his hand warmly. 'Grandfather Boris, thank heaven no one has been hurt!'

'What is the world coming to, Plank? It seems we can't even sit quietly in our own homes!'

Plank started speaking to my grandfather as if he were summarizing what had happened, but his words were intended for the ears of the policemen:

'There's no need to despair, Grandfather Boris! We're all here with you, as we always are in times of happiness

and trouble . . . As you know, my dear friend, nobody can enter or leave our houses without our permission, especially if he has dishonest intentions . . .'

Plank went over to the table and embraced all the criminals, one by one. As he did so he kissed them on the cheeks and gave the typical Siberian greeting:

'Peace and health to all brothers and honest men!'

They gave the reply that is prescribed by tradition:

'Death and damnation to all cops and informers!'

The policemen could only stand and watch this moving ceremony. By now their rifles were drooping as low as their heads.

Plank's assistants, communicating through the women present, told the policemen to get out.

'Now I hope all the cops present will leave this house and never come back again. We're holding their friends, whom we captured earlier; but once they're out of the district we'll let them leave in peace . . .' Plank spoke in a calm, quiet voice, and if it hadn't been for the content of his words, from his tone you might have thought he was telling a gentle, soothing story, like a fairy tale for children before they went to sleep.

Our friends formed a corridor with their bodies, along which the policemen began to file, one by one, hanging their heads.

I was elated; I wanted to dance, shout, sing and express some great emotion that I couldn't yet understand. I felt I was part of, belonged to, a strong world, and it seemed as if all the strength of that world was inside me.

I don't know how or why, but suddenly I jumped down from the bench and rushed into the main room, where the

red corner was. On the shelf, lying on a red handkerchief with golden embroidery, were the guns of my father, my uncle, my grandfather and our guests. Without thinking, I picked up my grandfather's magical Tokarev and ran back to the policemen, pointing it at them. I don't know what was going through my head at that moment; all I felt was a kind of euphoria. The policemen were walking slowly towards the door. I stopped in front of one of them and stared at him: his eyes were tired and seemed bloodshot; his expression was sad and desolate. I remember for a moment feeling as if all his hatred was concentrated on me. I aimed at his face; I tried as hard as I could to pull the trigger, but couldn't move it a millimetre. My hand grew heavier and heavier and I couldn't hold the pistol up high enough. My father burst out laughing, and called out to me:

'Come here at once, you young rascal! It's forbidden to shoot in the house, don't you know that?'

The policemen left, and a group of criminals followed them, escorting them to the boundary of the district; and then, when the escort came back, the second car, containing the policemen who were being held hostage, started off towards the town. But it was preceded by a car belonging to Plank's friends, who drove slowly to prevent the policemen from speeding up, so that the locals could insult them at their leisure, accompanying them out of the district in a kind of victory ceremony. Before they started off, someone had tied a washing line onto the back of their car with various things hanging on it: underpants, bras, small towels, dishcloths, and even one of my T-shirts, my father's contribution to the work of denigration. Scores of

people had come out of the houses to watch the sight of this washing line snaking its way along. The children ran along behind the car, trying to hit it with stones.

'Look at those thieving cops! They come to Low River to steal our underpants!' shouted one of the crowd, accompanying his comments with whistles and insults.

'What do they want with them? The top officials in the government must have stopped giving their dogs a bone. They haven't *got* any underpants!'

'Where's the harm, brothers, in being poor and not being able to afford a pair of underpants? If they come to us with honesty and like real men, with their faces uncovered, we'll give every one of them a nice pair of Siberian underpants!'

Grandfather Chestnut had even brought an accordion from his house, and he played and sang as he walked along behind the car. Some women started dancing, as he bellowed an old Siberian song at the top of his voice, raising his head, adorned by a traditional eight-triangled hat,[1] and closing his eyes like a blind man:

> Speak to me, sister Lena, and you too, brother Amur![2]
> I've travelled the length and breadth of my land,
> Robbing trains and making my rifle sing.
> Only the old Tayga knows how many cops I've killed!

1. For a description of this hat, see later in this chapter, p.43.
2. Lena and Amur are the names of two great Siberian rivers. Traditionally, criminal fortune is linked to these rivers: they are worshipped as deities, to whom you make offerings and whom you can ask for help in the course of your criminal activities. They are mentioned in many sayings, fairy tales, songs and poems. Of a fortunate criminal it is said that 'his destiny is borne on the current of Lena'.

And now that I'm in trouble, help me Jesus Christ,
Help me hold my gun!
Now that the cops are everywhere, Mother Siberia,
Mother Siberia, save my life!

I too ran along and sang, constantly pushing up the peak of my own eight-triangled hat, which was too big for me and kept slipping down over my eyes.

Next day, however, all my desire to sing melted away when my father gave me a good beating with his heavy hand. I had violated three sacred rules: I had picked up a weapon without the permission of an adult; I had taken it from the red corner, removing the cross that my grandfather had laid on top of it (only the person who puts the cross on top of a weapon can remove it); and lastly, I had tried to fire it in the house.

After that spanking from my father, my bottom and back were very sore, so, as always, I went to my grandfather for consolation. My grandfather looked serious, but the faint smile that flitted across his face told me that my problems, perhaps, weren't quite as bad as they seemed. He gave me a long lecture, the gist of which was that I had done something very silly. And when I asked him why the magic gun hadn't shot the policemen of its own accord, he told me that the magic only worked when the gun was used for an intelligent purpose, and with permission. At this point I began to suspect that my grandfather might not be telling me the whole truth,

because I wasn't convinced by this idea of a magic that only worked with adults' permission . . .

From that time on I stopped thinking about magic and started watching more closely the movements of my uncle's and my father's hands when they used their guns, and soon discovered the function of the safety catch.

In the Siberian community you learn to kill when you're very small. Our philosophy of life has a close relation to death; children are taught that taking someone else's life or dying are perfectly acceptable things, if there is a good reason. Teaching people how to die is impossible, because once you've died there is no coming back. But teaching people to live with the threat of death, to 'tempt' fate, is not difficult. Many Siberian fairy tales tell of the deadly clash between criminals and representatives of the government, of the risks people run every day with dignity and honesty, of the good fortune of those who in the end have got the loot and stayed alive, and of the 'good memory' that is preserved of those who have died without abandoning their friends in need. Through these fairy tales, the children perceive the values that give meaning to the Siberian criminals' lives: respect, courage, friendship, loyalty. By the time they are five or six, Siberian children show a determination and a seriousness that are enviable even to adults of other communities. It is on such solid foundations that the education to kill, to take physical action against another living being, is built.

From a very early age children are shown by their fathers how animals are killed in the yard: chickens, geese and pigs. In this way the child grows accustomed to blood, to the *details* of killing. Later, at the age of six or seven, the child is given the chance to kill a small animal himself. In this educative process there is no place for wrong emotions, such as sadism or cowardice. The child must be trained to have a full awareness of his own actions, and above all of the reasons and the profound meanings that lie behind those actions.

When a larger animal, such as a pig, an ox or a cow, is killed, the child is often allowed to practise on the carcass, so that he learns the right way to strike with a knife. My father often used to take my brother and me to a big butcher's shop, and teach us how to handle the knife, using the bodies of the pigs that hung from the hooks. A hand soon becomes decisive and expert, with so much practice.

When he is about ten, the child is a full member of the clan of the youths, which actively cooperates with the criminals of the Siberian community. There he has the chance to face many different situations of the criminal life for the first time. The older kids teach the younger ones how to behave and through the fights and quarrels and the handling of relations with the youths of other communities, each boy is broken in.

By the age of thirteen or fourteen, Siberian boys often have a criminal record, and therefore some experience of juvenile prison. This experience is seen as important, indeed fundamental, to the formation of the individual's character and view of the world. By that age many

Siberians already have some black marketeering and one murder, or at least attempted murder, to their name. And they all know how to communicate within the criminal community, how to follow, hand down and safeguard the founding principles of Siberian criminal law.

One day my father called me into the garden:

'Come here, young rascal! And bring a knife with you!'

I picked up a kitchen knife, the one I generally used to kill geese and chickens, and ran out into the garden. My father, his friend, Uncle Aleksandr, known to everyone as 'Bone', and my Uncle Vitaly were sitting under a big old walnut tree. They were talking about pigeons, the passion of every Siberian criminal. Uncle Vitaly was holding a pigeon in his hands; he had opened its wing and was showing it to my father and Bone, explaining something.

'Nikolay, son, go and kill a chicken and take it to your mother. Tell her to clean it and make some soup for this evening, because Uncle Bone is going stay here for a chat.'

A 'chat' involves the males of the family sitting together drinking and eating all night long to the point of exhaustion, till they collapse in a heap, one after another. When the males are having a chat, no one disturbs them; everyone goes about their own business, pretending the meeting doesn't exist.

I dashed to the chicken run at the end of the garden and grabbed the first chicken I could find. It was a normal

chicken, reddish in colour, fairly plump and perfectly calm. Holding it in both hands, I walked over to a nearby stump of wood, which we used for cutting off the heads of chickens like this one. It didn't try to escape and didn't seem concerned; it just looked around as if it were being taken on a guided tour. I grasped it around the neck and placed it on the stump, but when I raised the knife in the air to deliver the fatal blow, it started wriggling violently, until it managed to free itself from my hold, and give me a sharp peck on the head. I lost my balance and fell on my backside: I'd been defeated by a chicken. Looking up, I saw that my father and the others were watching the show. Uncle Vitaly was laughing, and Bone had a smile on his face too; but my father was more serious than ever – he had got to his feet and was coming towards me.

'Pick yourself up, killer! Give me that knife and I'll show you how it's done!' He walked towards the chicken, which in the meantime had started scratching a hole in the ground a few metres away. Once he was close to the chicken, my father arched his body, like a tiger poised to spring on its prey; the chicken was quite calm, and went on scratching at the earth for reasons known only to itself. Suddenly my father made a quick grab at it, but the chicken repeated its earlier action, and with a lightning-fast movement eluded my father's grasp and pecked him in the face, just under the eye.

'Damn it! He got me in the eye!' shouted my father, and my uncle and Bone got up from the bench under the walnut tree and ran towards him. But first Uncle Vitaly put the pigeon back in its cage, and then hung the cage up a few metres off the ground, to keep it away from our cat,

Murka, which loved killing pigeons, and always stayed near Uncle Vitaly, since he messed about with them all day long.

The men started making lunges at the chicken, which remained perfectly calm and deftly succeeded in dodging them every time. After a quarter of an hour of fruitless attempts the three men were out of breath and looked at the chicken, which went on scratching the earth and going about its chickenish business with the same determination as before. My father smiled at me, and said:

'Let's let it live, this chicken. We'll never kill it; it can stay here, in the garden, free to do as it pleases.'

That evening I told my grandfather what had happened. He had a good laugh, then asked me if I agreed with my father's decision. I answered him with a question:

'Why free that chicken and not all the others?'

Grandfather looked at me with a smile and said:

'Only someone who really appreciates life and freedom, and fights to the end, deserves to live in freedom . . . Even if he's only a chicken.'

I thought about this for a while and then asked him:

'What if all chickens become like him one day?'

After a long pause grandfather said:

'Then we'll have to get used to supper without chicken soup . . .'

The concept of freedom is sacred for the Siberians.

When I was six my Uncle Vitaly took me to see a friend of his whom I had never met, because he had been in