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Yakov Shafirovich

*Letters from the
North*

*War at the Arctic Circle,
1941 — 1944*

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**Letters from the North. War at
the Arctic Circle, 1941 – 1944**

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Аннотация

Frank narrative of a soldier's life at the Arctic Circle during World War II. A young man was drafted into the Red Army and brought to the shore of the Barents Sea just a few weeks before the German invasion. He spent the next three years on the front line, defending the Murmansk railroad. There he was wounded twice. In June 1944 he was transferred to the south to participate in a large-scale offensive in East Karelia, where he was gravely injured and, after a long stay in a hospital, sent home.

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Letters from the North War at the Arctic Circle, 1941 – 1944

Yakov Shafirovich

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Foreword to the English Edition

This book is a collection of letters sent by my father to his mother and other relatives during World War II. He was drafted into the Red Army on May 24, 1941, about one month before his 19th birthday and the German invasion of the Soviet Union. He was a well-read guy and a member of a drama club in his hometown Noginsk, near Moscow. It should be noted that despite the arrest of his father as a “Polish spy” in 1938, at that time he certainly was a “true believer,” according to Sharansky’s classification of people living under a totalitarian regime. During the war, he was on the Karelian front. Until June 1944, he was at the Arctic Circle, near Kandalaksha, where they defended the railroad that connected Murmansk, a strategic port on the Barents Sea, to the rest of the country. Although the German and Finnish troops failed to reach their goals and the general situation there could be described as “all quiet on the Western Front,” he was wounded twice. In June 1944 he was transferred to the south, specifically to the southern bank of the Svir River near Lake Ladoga, where a large-scale offensive against the Finnish troops just began. There he was soon wounded the third time and, after a long recovery, discharged from the military. He came back home on November 28, 1944. Soon after, he began to work as an assistant electrician and to study electrical engineering while

working full time. Then he worked as an electrical engineer until retirement. He died on May 2, 1995, a few days before the 50th anniversary of the end of war in Europe.

I think his letters are rather interesting because, as he noted a few times, he wrote everything he thought. All available letters are published without any omissions. American English was used in the translation, except for the dates. Many thanks to Luba Shafirovich for her help with translating to English.

Evgeny Shafirovich

El Paso, Texas

Foreword to the Russian Edition

This book presents letters written by my father Yakov Volfovich Shafirovich in the period from May 1941 to November 1944. Most letters were addressed to his mother Olga Nikolaevna Shafirovich and her sister Nadezhda (Nadya) Nikolaevna Soboleva, who both lived in the city of Noginsk, Moscow Region, at house No. 96 on Rogozhskaya Street.¹ They stored these letters. In the last years of his life (he died on 2 May 1995), my father sorted them out and put them in large notebooks, obviously for better preservation. In 2018, I read and scanned the letters, after which I decided that they might be of interest to other people as well. Despite his young age (18—22 years old), Yakov wrote, it seems to me, quite well, and the reader will find there many interesting details about the life of people under the extreme conditions of the front and the Arctic Circle. At the same time, as he noted himself, he wrote everything he thought, without embellishment. Also interesting are his reflections on the “Hamlet’s question” that arose periodically – to agree to be trained for becoming an officer and thereby reduce the likelihood

¹ To those who are unfamiliar with the Russian system of names: Volfovich and Nikolaevna are patronymic names, i.e., the name of Yakov’s father was Volf, and the name of Olga and Nadezhda’s father was Nikolai. Most first names in Russia have short versions, which are used by friends and relatives. Here Nadya is a short version of Nadezhda. (*Hereinafter, notes by Evgeny Shafirovich.*)

of death, at least for the duration of his training, or to disagree but to have the opportunity to become an engineer after the war (if not killed).

To make it easier to understand the letters, it is necessary to give a little information about the family in which my father grew up. Olga Nikolaevna was born in 1887 in the family of Nikolai Ivanovich Sobolev and Anna Grigorievna Soboleva. They lived in the city of Bogorodsk (renamed Noginsk in 1930), in a house opposite the Epiphany Cathedral on Tsarskaya (now Rabochaya) Street. Her first husband's name was Sergei Balashov, and she had two children from him – Olga (Lyalya) and Sergei. During the war, Olga Nikolaevna sewed soldiers' uniforms on a Singer sewing machine, which still exists (I did my homework using the top of this sewing machine as a desk when I was in elementary school).

Volf Lazarevich Shafirovich was born in 1885 in the town of Volpa, Grodno province. In 1915, because of the war, he was evacuated to Bogorodsk, where he worked as an accountant in a chemical workshop, and in 1920 he married Olga Nikolaevna. Yakov was born on 26 June 1922 in Bogorodsk. Since 1936, Volf worked in the supply department at Akrikhin plant. In 1938, he was “taken away” as people said that time. I knew from my father that Volf was arrested on the 18th of March, the day of the Paris Commune (thanks to which I remember both the day of his arrest and the day of that Commune). He was accused of spying for Poland and shot

on 13 August 1938 in Butovo.² Relatives were informed that Volf received ten years without the right to correspond. He was rehabilitated posthumously in 1958.

Despite these circumstances, Yakov was brought up in the spirit of Marxist-Leninist ideology and was an active Komsomol member, and during the war he joined the Party. Later on, his worldview changed. I remember he told me that while dealing with the letters he read them and was surprised at his naivety.

It should also be noted for understanding some of the letters that Yakov was engaged in a drama club at the Noginsk House of Pioneers.³ The letters often mention the head of the drama club Aleksandr (Sasha) Korneev and the club members Nikolai Brazhkin, Marta Terekhova, Evgeny (Zhenya) Khapulin, Anatoly (Nolik) Khrennikov, and Maria (Manya) Shtibel, as well as Yakov's school friend Vasily (Vasya) Galkin.

To prepare the book, I purchased Braina software, which converts speech into text (and “knows” more than 100 languages), and dictated all these letters in front of the computer. After dictation, it was only necessary to correct the mistakes made by the program. Many were quite funny. For example, instead of the word “упорно” (uporno), which means “stubborn” in English, the program wrote “y*****” (apparently, it contains a ban on “bad” words).

² The Butovo Firing Range was used as an execution site by NKVD.

³ Houses of Pioneers were organizations for extracurricular activities of children in the Former Soviet Union. They included various clubs.

For the convenience of the reader, the book is divided into chapters. In addition, several letters from other people to Olga Nikolaevna and Yakov are presented in the appendix.

All letters in this book are published with the spelling and punctuation of the authors. This includes the authors' mistakes and words written according to the then existing rules. I tried to avoid making any changes and, when Braina followed modern rules, I restored the original text. The only exception I've made is for dates. Letters often used Roman and Arabic numerals to indicate months – I usually wrote words instead. In addition, the dates of letters are everywhere at the beginning of the letter, regardless of where they were written. In some letters, the dates were missing, but all letters are in chronological order, established by postage stamps and by the content of the letters.

After the first publication, the texts of six letters from Yakov were added to the book. One of them was found in one of twenty envelopes kept separate from the letters, and five are in the Museum of the Noginsk Electric Grid. In addition, several notes and photographs have been added, and typos made during the preparation of the printed text of the letters have been corrected.

The author of the book thanks Vladimir Ivanovich Kozlov, Vladimir Yakovlevich Shafirovich, and Lyubov Evgenievna Shafirovich for their help and advice.

Evgeny Shafirovich

Part 1: Hello, North (May – August 1941)

We are going to build something.

*Hermits. Wheels knock. Murmansk. Oh,
and they flew from the embankment.*

NKVD camp and Polish officers. The

22nd of June. Retreat and planes.

Kandalaksha. No, forge the front here.

1.

27 May 1941⁴

Hello, my mother Olga Nikolaevna, my aunt Nadezhda Nikolaevna, my sister Olga Sergeevna and her hubby and children, my brother Sergei Sergeevich and so on and so forth. I bow to you to the ground with my shaved head.⁵

I am writing at 6 am in Tula between getting up and breakfast. We haven't been given any uniforms yet.

We will not stay in Tula. Our battalion, which is 20 times

⁴ Yakov was drafted into the Red Army and left Noginsk on 24 May 1941.

⁵ The use of patronymic names while addressing relatives and the second sentence were Yakov's joke.

larger than the Noginsk team, is called a construction battalion, and today we will go to build something.

In the company, I am the only one from Noginsk. The other guys from Noginsk are all in another company, except for Katz, who ended up in the third one. While we were doing nothing it was terribly boring and sad. Everyone looked back, which made them look into the future, but it is unknown. Yesterday, at a closed Komsomol meeting, a committee was elected, which we call here the presidium of the company's Komsomol organization. I was elected to be its member, and then the presidium chose me as the secretary of the company's Komsomol organization. So now I have things to think about. To tell the truth – I am somewhat at a loss – I do not know where to start.

We get up at 5. We go to bed at 11. We eat 3 times a day. The food is good. So, I don't know what to do with what I have in my suitcase. We sleep while not undressing on the bunk.

Our company will work on construction as concrete workers, bricklayers, and reinforcement workers.

When we arrive at the place, I will write the address.

Recently, Nadya watched a movie with a ticket that I bought for her.⁶ Now, apparently our service will be similar to the one shown there.

Then bye. Kisses to all. Say hello to Vasya, Horseradish,

⁶ This refers to the film "Prisoners" – see the next letter.

Braga, Myrta⁷ and other guys.

Do not show this letter to anyone except for the people to whom it is intended (see the beginning of the letter).

Regards, <signature>

2.

Hello Mom and others!

I am in Moscow in a freight car on the circle road. There are 42 of us in the car, so don't spit or step foot. They feed us with dried bread – you won't bite. By the way, I have two teeth hurting, which really interferes with army life. We run at the stops for buns and other food like water. We are worried because of the uncertainty of our future path.

We reached Tula safely, i.e., me, while the rest got drunk and stopped the train with a brake,⁸ about which, however, I learned only in Tula (I slept on the way). We were 800 people gathered. All are good fellows as if on selection: for whom the parents are sitting, who himself was sitting; in general, wicked bros. They placed us first on the floor side by side and then transferred us to an equally uncomfortable room, namely, they put us (also side by side) onto the bunks. The only difference is that the floor is easier to sweep than bunks... Hilarious!

⁷ Here he used nicknames for fun. Horseradish is “хрен” (khren) in Russian, used for Khrenov. Braga was used for Bragin, and Myrta for Marta.

⁸ This suggests that a similar case with “good soldier Švejk” during World War I in Jaroslav Hašek's novel could be based on real events.

When I found out that we were among, as Zhenya Kh.⁹ says, hermits, and that they would send us to construction, I immediately recalled the film “Prisoners”. I was in such a mood... oh-oh. In addition, I am the only one from Noginsk in the company – you won’t talk to anyone, you won’t even exchange a word. All the time I notice and control all my moods – that time I felt melancholy or some other devilry that pulled me to lie in the corner and cry. It was in this mood when I wrote my first letter. My tears were flowing, and I wrote such things that I tore it the next day, for which I am now infinitely happy. My “recovery” began with the election of me as the secretary of the company’s Komsomol organization: I got something to do. Now I live by daily routine, taking care of food, sleep, but the need for reading, theater, cinema is still almost non-existent. So, I haven’t recovered yet!

They wanted to appoint me as a platoon commander (there are 56 people in it). I would be their boss, for disobedience of which they will be arrested. I referred to the workload (the secretary) and safely got rid of this post. I want to experience ordinary Red Army life, and besides, it is calmer, and there is more time for club work.

They wake us up at 5 am. I wake up at the first command and get up like a robot (we are sleeping without undressing). Precisely like a robot: without thinking, without feeling, except for a great desire to sleep and severe cold (in such cases, I experience it at

⁹ Evgeny (Zhenya) Khapulin, member of the drama club.

any temperature). Yesterday I went to the assigned work for the first time (scheduled, of course). I cleaned and washed the boiler of the field kitchen, dragged water into it (30 buckets), poured and boiled water. This all happened from 2 am. I must say that I calmly endure all the hardships. And I even get satisfaction from work.

Now I looked through what I wrote. It's strange. I am writing in a joyful mood (after the decline), but it turns out that we have just the same hard labor here: bunks and work assignments and so on. This is how it turns out in the letter – it's not my fault – and it's not so bad here with us. I look closely at the guys, so in comparison with many of them, I'm just great. I have achieved the main thing in the army – I do not grumble at the commanders at any order, and this is a lot. Here, for an attempt to criticize the commander, they arrest you. What else? They took us to the bathhouse there, imagine, we... washed ourselves.

For good service and work, people will be transferred from our construction battalion to normal combat units. I hope to get through and think that the way through the secretary of the Komsomol organization is rather straightforward.

You will receive the next letter from the destination if we get there in less than a month; if a month or something like that, then, of course, I'll write on the way.

Say hello to everyone I mentioned in the first letter; it's boring to list everyone. Don't show my letters to anyone, I don't like it. To Nadya, Lyalya, that's enough, I beg you. Then bye! Thanks

for the spoon.

Prepare [*illegible*] a small map of the European part of the USSR.

Where are we going? If to the east or north – it's rubbish. I will gladly accept all other directions.

Red Army's greetings, Yashka.

I have written to Sasha. I will write to the rest when I get there.

3.

3 June 1941

Hello Mom!

I inform you that I have already sent two letters: one from Tula, one from Moscow – on the way.

In this – the third letter, I am already tired of sending greetings to “my relatives”, so convey them yourself on my behalf to Nadya and Lyalya and others.

On the 29th of May, at 11 am, we were loaded onto a train, and we moved on. We were in a boxcar on two-story bunks of 42 souls – in general, like herring in a barrel.¹⁰ During the journey, they fed us dried black bread (you can't bite), fish – dried fish or herring (you can't swallow), sugar (you can't bite through), and boiling water (not enough). Well, we were not at a loss, we put dried bread into a bag (mine) and into a corner, sugar and boiling water into the stomach, with fish, of course, and at every station there were raids on station buffets. I even

¹⁰ The Russian idiom for a crowded place.

managed to run to the market in one place, bought buns and half a liter of milk there, which I had the honor to eat.

All the way, we were engaged in the study of our path. Arriving in Moscow, we stopped on the circle road, not the railway station, so again we could not find out anything. At night we set off along the circle road and finally learned from railroad workers that we were on the Oktyabrskaya road. But here again questions arose: to the North or to the West (Lithuania, etc.)? Looking ahead, I will say that before reaching 110 km to Leningrad, we turned to Murmansk. While we were driving along Oktyabrskaya, there were a lot of stations, the stations were interesting, but when we turned off, there were no stations, no villages.

We go to the Murmansk direction and think: where will they take us: to Murmansk or Vyborg?

On both sides of the path, endless forests stretch – first a timber forest, and then a small forest, in which young trees, as soon as they grow up, fall. This is because of continuous swamps. When the guys in Tula laughed: “We will build in a swamp”, I laughed – nonsense. Only now I realized what kind of swamps it was.

So, the wheels are knocking, and in total they knocked for 5 days, I stand or sit and look at the door at the endless woods and endlessly stretching water on both sides of the road. Then a third companion of the northern landscape – a stone – was added to the forest and water. There are a lot of stones. Stones of various sizes,

from pebbles to rocks. But the rock is just big, it somehow doesn't affect you by its huge size, but there are stones here, looking at which you open your eyes. Imagine – there is a house with a mezzanine, and next to it is a stone that is one and a half times larger. When we arrived at the Medvezhya Gora¹¹ station, we were told that further the companion of the North – snow – would be added to the forest, water, stones and the already solid cold. As I heard this, my inner veins began to shake. The fact is that at night I cannot sleep for more than two hours in a row – I wake up from a terrible cold, run, go to bed again. More than once I recalled how you, very hesitantly, offered to put on a winter coat.

And then the snow appeared, and with it the blowing wind. We probably would have left our bones, but our superiors figured out to give us overcoats. As I put my overcoat on my coat, I felt like a von baron.¹² From the moment of getting the overcoat, I began to look at the world more cheerfully.

Before reaching 240 km to Murmansk, the steam locomotive was replaced by an electric one, and our huge train rushed forward to Murmansk at a speed of 50—60 km/h. Seeing such technology here, we immediately cheered up and decided that we would not be lost.

On the 2nd of June, at 3 pm, we, in full combat form – with suitcases, unwashed mugs, burst at full steam, or rather, at

¹¹ Bear's Mountain.

¹² The Russian idiom for feeling great, like a noble person does.

all electric currents, into the northernmost point of the Soviet Union – the ice-free port of Murmansk. This Murmansk is located among the mountains, on the shore of Kola Bay. There is snow on the mountains, although they are not high.

We unloaded, went to the shore, and began to wait in vain.

Again, the eternal question appeared: “Where to be?”

They gave us concentrated food, my favorite peas. We lit fires and made soup from it. I tried to take the soup as thick as possible and ate it with great appetite.

Well, here a story happened. An echelon from Gorky had still arrived before us, so its chiefs, the idiots, gave them the opportunity to get drunk. They all got drunk, stopped listening to any command and scattered into the city. In the city, they committed 20 robberies and struck their commander with a suitcase to his head. They sent us, as an organized public (in Tula, we were drilled) and as the ones dressed in overcoats, to stop this gang. Oh, and they flew from us from the embankment – it was a pleasure to watch. In the city, NKVD¹³ posted posts, several people were arrested. They will be shot for looting. The commander of that battalion was also imprisoned. He will get 10 years – at least.

At 11 pm we were sent to the NKVD camp. We walked 6 km and stopped. We began to burn fires, warm themselves, and so on. Of course, we did not sleep at night. And we stopped because we were led to the camp where they live, who do you think? –

¹³ The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs.

Polish officers. They were taken in Poland, they are here in their uniforms, with epaulets, they built a camp for themselves, lived in it, now they were moved somewhere, and we were in their place. So, we were waiting for their convoy of 6 thousand people to pass along the road. I happened to see three – they were probably sick – they were in a vehicle. Then we set off. We came to the camp and fell on the bunks. We slept until 4 pm today.

I got up, my arms ached, my back too. After all, we moved for 6 days, we slept a little, we also did not eat properly – mostly without water, we did not wash our faces.

With a great effort of will, I forced myself to wash with ice water. Then I shaved with the same water. Now I feel better. All that remained was an abnormal state due to sleep disorder. Today we do anything we want; tomorrow we will go to the bathhouse, get our uniform, and go to our place of residence.

I spoke with the deputy commander of our battalion for political affairs (a very cultured and decent person). He told me that, based on the information he received at the headquarters of the Army, we will travel by steamer for kilometers... two less than four kilometers from us to Manya Loseva's place of residence.¹⁴ We will live on the mainland, on the shore, not on an island. A town has been built there: barracks, a club, etc. A bed system – everyone has a bed and a bedside table. We will work for 8 hours, have drill and political training for 2 hours. We will live on self-financing – we will receive a salary

¹⁴ Apparently, Elektrostal, an industrial city a few kilometers from Noginsk.

minus 5 rubles 25 copecks for meals daily. Those who are highly qualified, for example, [*illegible*] locksmith, are said to be able to earn up to 600 rubles a month. We will comply with a special governmental assignment. We need to build something like an underground structure behind Obukhovo by November. After completing this assignment, we will go home, and we will be credited as two years of service.

All this is inaccurate.

I feel OK. I look at the difficulties philosophically – it is very useful for entering into life.

Then bye. My writing desire has dwindled. I wrote all that goes to the head. I didn't reread it. Many awkward sentences – it's OK. I didn't embellish anything – my heart doesn't want. I write everything that I feel at the moment. I know that you will not let tears fall (sorry).

Well, there are a lot of prisoners here.

Then bye. Hello to everybody. Next letter will be from the place.

I kiss you hard. Yasha

There is no night here – it's day all the time. It doesn't get dark at all. Very strange.

4.

8 July 1941

Hello Mom!

I don't know if you received my letter written on the second

day of the war; however, I don't know if you received the previous ones either, but the fact is that this letter might not have arrived due to martial law.

I can imagine your concern for me because you knew that I was near the border.¹⁵ I must say that after the 22nd of June, nothing has changed in our life: we have not seen newspapers from Murmansk, there is no population there. We were informed about the war at a meeting, we hatched our eyes, began to work 12 hours instead of 8, and otherwise everything was the same as before. But now we very often interrupt work and run into the bushes, do not think anything bad, from planes, and they often fly here. Sometimes they flew so low that the fascist signs were clearly visible. I must say that we behaved not like we should have in war: we ran into the bushes without haste, laid down on our sides, on a dry place, leaned out. The Germans decided to teach us a lesson.

You know from the newspapers that on the 29th of June the Germans launched an offensive “on all fronts from the Barents Sea to the Gulf of Finland”. We had a chance to experience it on our shoulders. I will not describe the details, I will only say that we did not eat anything for 5 days, but only walked 50 km a day, over water and mountains – up, down. In addition, we were often bombed. It will seem strange to you, but it turns out that the bombing is not the worst thing. When you are lying

¹⁵ According to a biographical sketch written by Yakov in 1951, his first location was on Sredniy (Middle) Peninsula.

and bombs are falling not far from you, this is okay. But when the Germans see people, they start shooting with machine guns when the plane dropped the bomb and goes out of its dive. That's when bullets fall on you from above, when fragments fly from the stone behind which covered your head, then the heart pours out with cold sweat, and the body is pressed deeper into the ground. I have survived four such bombings – shootings. One shelling lasted for half an hour. After the shelling, because of the nervous tension, I really want to sleep, I feel deep fatigue. Yes, we have gone through unexpectedly a lot during these days. Even the commander, who was on six fronts, said that he would not forget the 29th. Yes, don't forget that we were unarmed!!! And there were paratroopers. Now reinforcements have come to the front, and the Germans have been driven away. Oh, and they beat them! Looks like they do not want to fight, their planes – about ten, seeing our three, flee away, the soldiers, as a rule, cannot withstand a bayonet fight – they run. Our soldiers are in a fighting mood, and in connection with the partial successes of the Germans, they are terribly frenzied. Our soldiers do not capture Germans or Finns – they slaughter them.

Now I feel good, as if there is no war either – I am traveling on a train from Murmansk – I do not know where. They say we will live in barracks, learn to shoot and so on. We were turned from builders into a reserve infantry regiment. Once we arrive at the place, I will write the address. My suitcase with all the stuff

was bombed. Say hello to Grisha,¹⁶ Sergei.

Regards, I kiss you. Yakov.

5.

Hello Mom, Nadya, Lyalya, and all relatives.

In the last letter (I don't know if it arrived), when I wrote on the way, I could not describe everything properly. I am writing now in brief.

After the 22nd of June, we found ourselves in the center of front-line events and our whole life went off the road and fell on uncharted paths. Now I can say that I received my first baptism of fire. Five times I was under bombing and shooting with a machine gun from an aircraft. The planes here use the following tactics: it flies with its nose down (dives) and throws a bomb beneath, then it lifts the nose up and flies up. At that time, a machine gun is shooting from the tail. That's when the machine gun starts shooting and bullets click near you, and they clicked 30 cm of my head, then your heart really stops, and you are pressing all of you into the ground.

Well, now a lot of these planes have been beaten. They are only eager to bomb where there are no anti-aircraft guns or our aircraft, so they almost literally do no harm. When three of our planes appear, nine of them immediately flee away. One of our fighters landed on a German bomber and rode it. That pilot was scared to death and landed in our positions. One of their pilots

¹⁶ Grigory Nikitich Kopalkin, Lyalya's husband.

said that it is impossible to fight with our pilots: “they, he says, are mischievous” – they are not fighting according to (German) rules.

Fun!!!

We will probably celebrate the 7th of November in Berlin.

Well, about myself.

I now live in Kandalaksha. We live in the forest under the bushes. At night it was so cold at first that I didn't sleep but ran, now we have adapted, with three friends we put an overcoat on the ground, all three lie down and immediately cover ourselves, it turns out very warm. Now, however, we have made dugouts for ourselves. We are engaged in studies. So, I got my wife.¹⁷ I take care of her. Besides, I am now the squad leader. They entrusted me with 15 souls. The food here is very good. I feel cheerful. The only thing missing is that since the 24th of May, I have not slept undressed or even taken off my shoes. Soon we will receive good new uniforms, otherwise we are like partisans – builders (patches and holes shine). Soon we will probably go closer to A.S. Ginzburg.¹⁸

By then, write to the address Kandalaksha, mail 79, on demand, Shafirovich, Ya. V. Write your full address on the envelope.

Just write more and as soon as you receive my letter, otherwise

¹⁷ He meant a gun.

¹⁸ Apparently, he wanted to inform them that they would go in the direction of Leningrad. A.S. Ginzburg, one of the family's acquaintances, lived in Leningrad.

I can leave again. I feel very, very unwell from the absence of letters from you. After all, I don't know anything – how it is there. Write!!! Kisses to all in the strongest way. Yes, my suitcase disappeared with all the contents.

Greetings, Yasha.

6.

Hello Mommy, dear Sister, Aunt, and other relatives.

I bow to you to the ground. I don't know, unfortunately, how your life is there, mine I must say is quite good. True, I must say that there is not enough time, and there is no free time at all. Despite the fact, however, that we learn a lot, this training is much easier than building a road. I command the squad, train them. You have to learn something yourself while you show them. What else? It seems that there is nothing more to write.

Mom, I will ask you to tell my address to Sasha, Vasya (if they are in Noginsk), Khren, Nina and Marta Terekhovs. Apologize to them for me not writing to them. However, apart from Nolik, I wrote several letters to all of them. I think that they will all understand that I was, and even now I am not that far from the front and that we did not come here to rest. There was nowhere to write, no paper, no pen, no time, and besides, there was simply no physical strength to sit down to write a letter. Now I more or less have the opportunity to write to all of you, so I beg you – write. After all, I have not received a single letter! What's the matter with all of you there? Allah knows. You Mommy cheer

up there. Lyalya probably needs help a lot. But maybe they didn't take Grisha? How is Sergei? See, I don't know anything.

Well, for now, with the Red Army arctic greetings. Ya.

My final address is Field Post Office 441, Reserve Regiment, 2nd rifle company, Shafirovich, Yakov Volfovich.

Write your address on the envelope. Don't write No. 441, just write 441.

Khapulin and Katz are alive and well.

7.

29 July 1941

Mom and all my friends – hello.

I am sending you my warmest Red Army arctic greetings.

My life has finally improved and returned to a normal track. I already wrote that I am the squad commander here. I am busy with fighters – I teach them bayonet fighting, tactics, rifle components. You wonder – how can I know this myself? Yes, I didn't understand anything about this. But I grasp the explanations on the fly, and I finally master them myself already in the process of training my fighters.

The other day I had to part ways with my friends. Except for us, the commanders, all our soldiers went to the front. They are now at the forefront. It seems, I can't say for sure, that Monya Katz also left with them. The command recognized all the soldiers of my squad fit for their stay at the front. It is very pleasant to feel that I have already brought though small but

benefit to the state for defense.

Now I am working with new fighters. This is likely to continue.

Today I was told that I and all the commanders (prepared from soldiers like me) were enrolled in the regimental school, which is being organized again here. Upon leaving it, I will receive the rank of sergeant. So, if I am alive, and I did not doubt it even when it was possible to doubt it, I will have to serve for 3 years.

Studying at school lasts for a month and a half. But it hasn't been organized yet.

The big question is where after school – to the front or continue to train fighters? Anyway. Until now, I did not control my fate but completely obeyed it, and, I must say, it never let me down. I think that this time I will not be wrong too.

The weather is wonderful here. Very hot. We swim. Today I hit the road and went to pick cloudberry – this is a very tasty berry. If not for 12 hours of classes and zero free time, I would not have felt the war. Well, I forgot. I took an oath of allegiance to my beloved socialist homeland.

The food is very good. I receive a salary of 12 rubles 75 copecks. This is for the Arctic (instead of 8.50), for the Arctic sometimes they give 600 g of condensed milk. Oh, and it's delicious!

Well, it seems that's all about me.

Write to me immediately if you want to find me here (anything can happen), write more, as I have not received a single

letter. Tell everyone my address:

441 Field post station, 56th reserve regiment, 2nd rifle company, Shafirovich, Ya. V. (Write the return address on the envelope.)

Write where Grisha, Sergei, Sasha, Vasya are. How are Lyalya, Lida, Vadya.¹⁹ You and Nadya?

How are bombing and other stuff. How is communication with Moscow?

Here is some information about the war. The captured German said that they were told that Kandalaksha was taken on the 5th day of the war, Minsk and Kiev on the 7th, Moscow was burning and surrounded. When he was told the real situation, he smiled and said, "Now I understand what the matter is." And when he was fed, he hatched his eyes and said, "We don't get such food even on holidays."

I saw Mannerheim's leaflet to the Karelians. He says national culture and freedom were taken away from you. Here, he says, we have known freedom (this is under the German boot). These leaflets are used as paper for tobacco. The paper is decent for this.

Then bye.

Hello to everybody. I kiss you hard, Yashka Shafirovich.

PS Khapulín is doing just like me. Nedro is here too.

¹⁹ Lydia (Lida) and Vadim (Vadya), the children of Olga Sergeevna and Grigory Nikitich.

8.

8 August 1941

Hello Mom!

Yesterday I received your two letters from the 25th and 26th. Well, I'm not talking about the joy of the very fact of receiving letters. Clearly, it became more fun.

Your message that everything is like before is very encouraging. From your letters, I understood that you don't really feel the war there, just "watch the clouds." I am very happy about that. By the way, since we were bombarded and fired upon when we were still outside Murmansk (you received a letter about this), I have not heard a single bomb explode. They fly here sometimes, and high in the skies – barely visible. We are even glad for them: when we hear the buzz, we stop classes and lie down. Thus, our rest is lengthened. Well, this is by the way and as a joke.

Belatedly, I congratulate you on your name day. By the way, I celebrated my birthday lying behind a stone and hiding my head from the bullets falling from above.

Tell Lyala to write how she is doing, no time to write separately yet. I wonder how Vadim walks and Lida reads. Hello to them. Write about the location of the House of Pioneers and about its existence and fate in general. Khren and Braga left, you wrote. And where to? Their address? The same goes in more detail about Vasya, Sasha, Tolya Terekhov. Write about all my schoolmates and other comrades.

I am very glad that you, our mothers, are meeting each other.

Zhenya Khapulin is alive and well and has not left me yet though we are in different companies. Nedro is together with Zhenya, in the same company.

Lesha Korotkov went to the front. Monya Katz too. They got into a good team. Our regiment received gratitude for them. I am proud that there are 16 fighters of my training among them.

They say that they beat the Finns there (there are few Germans there). There are already wounded among them. They are in our hospital. There are almost no killed there – after all, our troops are on the defensive.

Well, there is no time to write more. I, comrades, have to ask your permission to write letters in response to your letters, to Nadya and Lyalya in your name, otherwise there is no time.

Only now have they brought Aunt Nadya's postcard. Thanks. Write more about what and how everything is there.

Nadya sent that postcard to the old address. This is just a clarification of the postal address. Now the address is even more precise: 441 Field Post Station, 56th Reserve Regiment, 2nd Rifle Company.

With Red Army greetings from the Arctic Circle. Your Yashka!

PS Yesterday I gorged on blueberries. You asked about sending a parcel. Wait for now.

Well, I forgot. Today we sent another batch of warriors. This is my second group that went.

I asked to go to the front too. The commander says: "No,

forge the front here.” This means, teach the fighters. Orders are not discussed. I turned and walked away. And now I’m forging. Trying. I think I won’t fail. One soldier of my squad is already almost a hero (he is from the first team, where Katz is).

9.

13 August 1941

Hello Mom!

With this letter we have already started correspondence. Hooray!!! Henceforth, I will write in your name in response to Nadya and Lyala too. Otherwise, there is no time.

Write down Galkin’s address if any.

I am very glad that Nolik and Brazhkin left for the Red Army. Well, they’re probably already at war. Write Sasha’s address, if you have one. Say hello to all comrades and acquaintances. Write if Comrade Sidorenko, Comrade Lukin, and Khrenov are there.

I am very pleased and happy with the situation with Lida, Vadia, Grisha, Seryozha. Warm greetings to all of them.

I have everything here as before. But I think that one of these days I can go to the front line.

Now I am finishing with the third team of trainees. They will be leaving soon. Well, there are no more changes. Yes, you write, you have berries there. We had cloudberries, now there are a lot of blueberries. We have tactics. Here you position your squad in defense, and you go to pick the berries. Oh, and I eat them a lot!

Yesterday a soldier came to us from the front line. He is from my squad – from the first team. He said that we trained them well. He was injured in the leg but is already recovering and soon goes to fight again. He says that Finns throw leaflets in which they write, “Well, why are you fighting in vain? Moscow, Leningrad, and Kiev have long been taken.” Did you find it funny? It was very funny to me. He says that instead of bombs, for some reason, stones are falling from planes. Is it a lack of bombs or the work of our friends? Well, it is clear that stones do not bring any harm. Now they are throwing bombs made in 1941, so eight out of 20 do not explode. And once one bomb exploded, and there was tobacco there. This is certainly not accidental. They are fighting (that’s for sure) only drunk. They are being mowed down like grass. And our troops are not yet advancing but only beating. Wait, we will go on the offensive. Only down will fly. It will be hard to see where the Germans have what, only the heels will sparkle.

So, wait. We’ll chase them soon.

Well, how is it going with the bombing? I heard they got into the Tchaikovsky Hall. And I have never been there!!! Do they fly there? How is Manya Loseva’s homeland?²⁰ People say they dropped off there?

From your letter I understood that there are pioneer camps there (hello to Nina), and they go swimming near our house. It’s good that everything is the same. How about food? We are

²⁰ Probably the city of Elektrostal.

fed well. And on the front line – canned meat, condensed milk, butter, cabbage soup with bacon, porridge – as much as you want. And the Finns have dried bread like burnt boards. Hilarious!!!

You are asking about sending a parcel. Ship it, maybe it will find me. I need envelopes, notebooks, a foldable knife with a can opener, a small fork, collars, socks (one warm pair). Don't send jam. No sugar needed. Otherwise, you will send it because of tradition! I only ask that the parcel is not oversized. I forgot – send the razor blades. More!!

Well, that's all for now.

Khapulin and Nedro are here. I don't know anything about Katz since he left.

Hello to Antosha. Where is the House of Pioneers?

Greetings to Lyalya, Nadya, Lida, Vadya, and all Noginsk.

Regards, <signature>



Evgeny Khapulin (left) and Yakov on the train. May 24, 1941.

Part 2: The first battles

(September 1941 – February 1942)

On the front line. The death of friends. School for junior commanders. I am becoming a ski lover. Bathhouse and wood grouse. I am again in my unit. Red ball with yellow-red rays. We are all hungry for the offensive! Shells have already entered the daily routine.

10.

7 September 1941

Hello Mom!

My life has changed radically. On the 23rd of August, I was sent to the front.²¹ And here I am at the forefront. On the second

²¹ From that time until June 1944, Yakov served in the 273rd Infantry Regiment of the 104th Infantry Division, near the Alakurtti station. The division defended the road leading to Kandalaksha and the Kirov railway. At the end of August 1941, the division retreated and settled on the Verman line (the Verman River between the Upper Verman and Lower Verman lakes, about 20 km east of Alakurtti), where the border between the USSR and Finland was before the war of 1939—1940. The division defended this line until the retreat of the Germans in the fall of 1944.

day of my combat life, my three-line rifle killed two White Finns²². That was all my combat successes so far.

Well, how do I feel here? Imagine – I am OK. Before, I always faced the truth and did not claim that I was not afraid of anything, that I was brave, etc. Here, to my surprise, it turned out that, in comparison with the majority, I tolerate the nearness of death rather well. And death constantly reminds of itself with the whistling of bullets, the bursting of shells and mines.

So far, it's not very cold here. There was, however, a night when the water froze. The overnight stay and the whole life under the open sky are very annoying; otherwise, everything would be fine.

A tragicomic incident happened to me tonight. My tunic and shirt caught fire from the fire, and the whole side burned out. I woke up with a burn. Hilarious! Now I walk with ventilation.

I feel the need for a sweatshirt, two pairs of warm gloves, footcloths and socks, blades, paper, envelopes.

Unfortunately, this address is probably short-lived because I and my group are not permanently attached to any unit.

Now I am writing about sad news. Nedro and Zhenya Khapulín came to the front with me. I kept in touch with them all the time. Once I was sent to the rear for food. At that time, there

²² The Soviet propaganda called the Finnish soldiers “White Finns” meaning that there are Red Finns and White Finns, like the Reds and the Whites during the Russian Civil War.

was a hot battle, during which Nedro and Khapulín were killed.²³ I was saved, as you can see, by chance. It is not known exactly what happened to them – killed or taken prisoner – I think that they did not surrender and died a heroic death. Yes, now there is no Khapulín – our friend. And in 1945, the drama club scheduled a meeting of all members. So, we met... Well, OK, then I'll tell them about the last days of his life. (For some reason, I have no thoughts that I can be killed, etc.).

Mom, there is no time for letters in a combat situation. Don't worry if you won't receive them for a long time.

Then bye. Kisses to everyone.

PS The last letter was received from Aunt Nadya on the 2nd of August.

Greetings, your Yasha. Write more about everything!

11.

13 September 1941

Hello Mom!

On the 7th of September I sent you the last letter. In case you did not receive it, I inform you that since the 23rd of August I have been at the front. I had a chance to participate in two battles. In the first of them, I sent two White Finns to the next world. At this point, my combat successes have paused so far

²³ Their names and the word "killed" were obscured, apparently by a censor, but one can make out.

because now I am in the guard of the headquarters. You know, it's very interesting how quickly a person gets used to all kinds of conditions: on the second day I was already calmly having breakfast and lunch to the accompaniment of artillery fire and the whistle of bullets. And they use explosive bullets – as a bullet touches a knot, it explodes. There is continuous crackling noise due to this.

I am all the time in the open air. I will probably breathe oxygen for life. We all have a very good appetite from the forest air. This is also helped by the fact that we receive 100 g of vodka every day. As before breakfast you drink it, so half a liter of soup [*crossed out*]. If there is a possibility, send me a parcel. I need:

- 1). Sweatshirt or [*illegible*]
- 2). Warm socks
- 3). Warm footcloths
- 4). Warm mittens (with finger)
- 5). Shoe polish
- 6). Paper and envelopes.

When you write, put an envelope with paper in the letter or send it in a separate envelope. Well, that's all. I'll tell you about the rest when I arrive. And I will arrive by route through Berlin. Well, we will not have to wait long to see the Red Army on this route.

Write how Aunt Nadya, Lyalya, Grisha, Lida and Vadya, Seryoga are doing there.

Write in more detail. Otherwise, Nadya writes that she wants

to write about everything, but that her “breath stole from joy in her goiter” and her thoughts scattered. And does it make it easier for me? She could drink water and write about everything.

In that letter, I wrote about the fate that befell Khapulin and Nedro. I was with them on the front lines. On the 30th of August, the commander sent me to bring food for the soldiers. In my absence, Khapulin and Nedro perished.

Here we got confusion with the addresses of the group where they were. Therefore, they will probably not inform their relatives soon. I will certainly try to insist on informing them.

Yes, I wonder which of the drama club members will remain to meet in 1945? Sorry for Khapulin. And for Albert too. Well, I will do my best to take revenge. I have nothing else to help the grief of their mothers.

Give everyone there my address. Couldn't Lyalya write me a letter?

Don't worry if there are no letters for a long time. No time and wish to write. Interruptions are possible. Now I will not write until I get an answer from you.

My address: Field post station 280, 273rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd battalion, Yakov.

12.

7 December 1941

Hello Mom! For some reason, there have been no letters from

you for a long time, so I am writing not in response.

My life went on normally until the 26th of November. And on the 26th I was sent to the junior commanders' school, so now I am not on the front line for the first time in many months of war. Here I am spared the daily enjoyment of the whistle of bullets and the hoot of shells. The explosions from the shells can be heard, it is true, but in the distance – quietly. You know, it's very interesting – right away my war changed to peace. It is now necessary to welcome the commanders and to address them in accordance with the regulations and follow many other rules. After the liberties of the front line, this whole discipline seems very strange. We live like in peacetime with fixed times to get up and to sleep – we need to get used to it again. Yesterday the school commissar sent me personally a gift from the Kandalaksha women for my good academic performance. There was a “cocoa and cream” pill. I dissolved it and tasted the cocoa with an indescribable pleasure!!! I am doing well with my studies, so I will soon be the commander of our Red Army.

Strangely, our weather is not very frosty. However, two days ago it spun at -35 C° (at night). The Germans, and they are still here in boots, garrison caps and summer overcoats, are probably very cold. We, dressed in sheepskin coats, felt boots, and hats, are not so cold.

Write how you live there, what do you hear about Vasya? Does Zhenya Khapulin's mother know about his death?

Well, bye! My address: Field post station 280, 273rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd battalion, 4th company.

With front-line Arctic greetings, cadet <Signature>

PS Yes, tomorrow we will have a movie. Here is happiness!

13.

Hello Mom! Just now I have received your two letters dated the 7th and 11th of November. Great that you guessed to put the envelope and paper, otherwise I don't have a lot of these materials. You wrote that you were upset that I received a poor parcel. Freak, if you lived for six months among stones, forests, swamps, and snow without a roof, then you would understand what joy this parcel brought me.

You write that Grisha has been evacuated from the hospital. By God, I couldn't figure out how he got to the hospital? Write in more detail where he is and what happened to him.

I am now a cadet of the junior commanders' school. I study! Soon I will be the commander of our beloved Workers' and Peasants' Red Army²⁴! You write that Comrade Stalin's report has poured new strength into you there. Well, there's no need to talk about us! Now our army is really becoming professional – we have learned to fight! And we have learned hard! Be sure – we will soon chase the German bastards. Yesterday I learned that

²⁴ That was the official name of the Red Army.

England had declared war on Finland²⁵. Nice event!

Here also Grandfather Frost²⁶ is fighting hard with the Germans. I saw myself how German sentries run to the post in a tunic, and there they take off quilted jackets from other sentries and put them on. In boots, overcoats, and garrison caps in frost of -35°C you can't do much. They don't even have camouflage coats. Sentries wear white aprons – as he turns, the back is black. And he can't not turn, he has to perform the German dance “Frost on the Skin”. We, dressed in sheepskin coats, felt boots, hats, and mittens, only laughed. I was lying in a white camouflage coat ten steps from a German sentry and smiled at his dance. Now he no longer dances...

Well, bye, be happy. Greetings to Lida and Vadya and to all of you. Did you receive my message about the death of Zhenya Khapulín and Nedro? Kissing hard, Yasha.

14.

25 December 1941

Hello Mom!

Day is breaking. The frost slightly stings the face and legs. Skis slide in deep snow. We're going to class. The path lies through a wild forest, through frozen swamps and lakes, through steep high hills. The greatest pleasure is given by a frantic descent from high mountains – not along a clean slope, but between trees,

²⁵ Britain declared war on Finland, Hungary, and Romania on 5 December 1941.

²⁶ Santa Claus's analog in Russia.

through branches whipping in the face, through fallen trees and ravines. Maneuvering through all these obstacles is rather tricky. A minor mistake, and you continue to descend on your back.

This ride is a tremendous pleasure. I seem to be becoming a ski lover. It's good when you ride like that. But yesterday I learned a lesson. They ordered the offensive with a rifle in one hand and sticks in the other, i.e., move quickly and lay down. I looked like a kitten on ice. Complete helplessness. Fun! Well, nothing, we'll master it soon.

In 10—15 days, I have tests. I'll hand it over and go to the front line.

Yes, here we have a story: when God made the light, he did not have enough material, he got angry and spat – it turned out to be Finland. Hilarious!

Yesterday I received a letter from Aunt Nadya, dated the 27th of November. Thanks. I do not understand where Lyalya works. She writes that she works a lot at night?! You write that there are often alarms. Now they are probably less common. The Germans are running away from Moscow. We gladly listen to every news of the events on the western front. OK, soon we will chase them here. It is our turn to laugh. Well, let's take revenge at once. And we will take revenge so that we will drive them to death.

Then bye. Say hello to everybody.

I kiss you hard, Yasha.

1 January 1942

Hello Mom!

Happy New Year!

Yes, a year has passed – a year that for all of us was a year of hard ordeals and hardships. For me, this year was a year of great fundamental changes in my life. After school, I was a person on duty at a crafts school and the head of the drama club, and then the director of the House of Pioneers. Then civil life ended. The military life began. A construction battalion – a long working day, knee-deep [*torn of*], 100 wheelbarrows a day, the harsh Soviet Arctic, tundra, the North Sea. Then – the reserve regiment. Hastily mastering military science, then training soldiers for the front. Then I went to the front myself. There were heavy battles and great ordeals here. Seven days of hunger, death of friends and comrades. Then a brutal winter. Instead of a full day, a complete arctic night. Night – in which you stand at the post and all, to the last muscle, strained fully. Then school. And now I am no longer a Red Army soldier. Now I am a cadet.

This is the end of 1941, the year in which we learned about our great sacrifices, but on the other hand we saw our greatest victories over the enemy.

What will the new 1942 bring us? Of course, a victory. I will conquer it already as a sergeant. My strength will increase. Instead of two hands, I will beat the enemy with a whole squad.

In the new year, Hitler will have to think and think hard. Or

maybe he won't be able to think? However, this entirely depends on us. Well, we will try!... In general, we will execute Stalin's order, we will exterminate every single one of the Germans who have climbed into our territory as its occupiers.

How did you celebrate the New Year there? Really curious.

Well, I met it well yesterday. I'll tell you a secret: I didn't drink my 100 grams for five days, and yesterday at 12 o'clock I celebrated the New Year with half a liter of Moscow wheat vodka. And today the command sent an order – a New Year congratulation. It turns out that we also fought here for a reason. We killed up to ten thousand Germans and White Finns during the war. Well, bye.

Happy new year, year of victory!!!

Regards, Yasha. New Year's greetings to all Nogintsey²⁷!

PS Sorry if it's awkward – my head hurts after the New Year.

16.

12 January 1942

Hello Mom! Today I received Aunt Nadya's postcards for the 9th and 12th of December. She writes that there are no letters from me. They should be because I wrote more or less regularly.

17 January 1942

Because of tests that began at school, I am finishing my letter only today.

These last days I was not so worried about the tests as I was

²⁷ Noginsk residents.

enjoying the flavor of the tests so memorable to me from my studies in Noginsk. My studies are over! During my studies, I learned how to shoot well, and I am very pleased with this. Now I do all the exercises with my rifle perfectly. Three days ago, I went to the bathhouse. By the way, about the bath. A real “Russian” bathhouse or, more precisely, “Finnish”. The bathhouse itself is hot and stuffy and painful in the head, and you have to undress and dress outside. As soon as you jump out of it in Adam’s costume, and the frost outside is -20 to -30°C (the usual temperature here), well, the frost penetrates to the marrow of your bones. But when you get dressed, it is a great pleasantness that takes apart you. Yes, it is good to wash in the local bath, although when I wash, I remember the Noginsk bath with pleasure. Well, so I went to the bathhouse. I went into the forest for firewood, I looked at the tracks. I went up, from under my nose the white partridges would jump out of the snow, and I was stupefied. I ran after them [*torn off*] I ran for two hours up to my waist in the snow, but [*torn off*] could not shoot: they are white, and you can’t see a damn thing of them in the snow. Suddenly I saw that a wood grouse flew and sat down on a tree. I crawled to him no worse than in battle, took aim, and the wood grouse fell. He weighed as much as 6—8 kilograms. Huge! That was a snack! 100 g of vodka and wood grouse fried in oil! Bliss!

Now about the tests. Of course, I passed them safely. I studied the weapon to the smallest screw. Tomorrow there will be a report from the commissar about our studies at the club. Then

the order on the conferring of ranks will be read, then there will be a concert and a movie. Tomorrow I'll go to the unit. There I will have to train fighters. Our unit is now studying because it is on vacation, not far from here. Well, that seems to be all.

Write how you live there.

Hello to everyone, everyone. Hello to Aunt Nadya!

Regards, Yakov

PS The hardest frost for the winter was -42°C . Today it's probably even stronger, but I don't know for sure the temperature.

17.

Night from 20 to 21 January 1942

Hello Mom! My studies have ended, and here I am again in my unit. On our release, all the command of the division was there, a brass band played. Everything was very solemn. And now I am a commander in the Red Army. Now my task is to lead my soldiers into battle. Leading into battle means skillfully commanding during the battle, being ahead, inspiring fighters with your personal example. And all this is not so easy to do while not in training but under bullets. You need to be truly brave, conscientious, and crystal-honest. Only then can you enjoy the boundless trust, respect, and love of the fighters, and without this, again, you cannot go into battle. How I can cope with these tasks will be shown by the upcoming offensive battles, in which the German and Finnish evil spirits will be wiped off the

face of the earth, and the Soviet people will have the opportunity to live in friendship with the Finnish working people.

You write that a real Russian winter has been established, and from the newspapers I know that a real German escape has also been established. Yes, they have something to run from. The harsh arctic winter makes it difficult to survive in combat conditions if you are wearing a cap, boots and, albeit woolen, an overcoat. And this is how the Germans are still dressed. That is why they began to surrender in groups, with the officers together, without waiting for the cruel slap of the bony paw of the Russian big bear. And the Russian bear is already beginning to seriously bare its teeth at its neighbor in the north, it is already sharpening its claws, preparing for the last decisive slap on the hunched back of Hitler's lackey – Finland. Speaking of Finland and its cursed nature. We laugh here that when God created the world, at the end he did not have enough material, then he spat, and it turned out to be Finland. What a story! By the way, about the local climate. It is very strange, fickle. The weather can literally change 3—4 times a day. Severe frosts (already at -44°C) are replaced by rather warm weather of -10 to -12°C . In general, the usual temperature here is -18 to -25°C . But due to the absence of wind and very good warm uniforms, frosts are not so sensitive. Although I still managed to freeze, and rather hard, the lobes on the fingers of my right hand. Today is the 20th of January – half of winter is over. Behind the long arctic night. Today the day has increased by an hour and a half. Yesterday

I saw the sun for the first time in winter. True, I saw it from a high hill, and I saw a red ball with yellow-red rays gliding along my legs. But even this after Northern night made me happy.

My unit is now on vacation, some distance from the front line. There are intense activities, they go on reconnaissance sometimes, sometimes to the rear of the enemy. I haven't been there yet. But soon it will have to. We will have to stay awake there for several days because it is quite tricky to fall asleep under a spruce in the snow.

Well, so far, this is all I wanted to write. I am now the chief of the guard (now I am relieved of standing watch, and this is a great relief). I changed posts and sat by the stove made of a gasoline barrel, and now I am writing this letter to you. Yesterday I received your letter of 12 December and a postcard of 27 September. In the postcard, you write that you sent the package that I received in October. It's interesting how post works. Fun!

You write that Boris²⁸ studies at a school for adults. Why? Unclear. Explain! Why is Grisha in the city of Osh? Who and where does he work? You write that Vasya passed the city of Kuibyshev. Is he going to the front with Gladyshev? Say hello to the teachers you see. We will avenge Zhenya. We will take revenge for everything. Give Natasha A. my warmest greetings. Tell her, by the way, that she could write a little letter. Where does Lyalya work, and what is her job? Hi to Aunt Nadya. I wish

²⁸ Son of Anna (Nyura), sister of Olga Nikolaevna.

her not to drown in the wisdom of science.²⁹ Regards, Yasha.

18.

7 February 1941

Hello Mom!

My life goes on as before. As before, I belong to the small number of non-smokers here, although no one would classify me as teetotal. You know, you get used to these 100 g of vodka – our daily ration – so it’s boring without them.

Two days ago, I performed an independent combat mission for the first time. I led the fighters through the hills and lakes on skis following the map. In just 13 hours, we did 65—75 km. The path through deep snow and hills was difficult though we went skiing.

We are all hungry for the offensive!

Then bye. Write how you are.

Hello to everybody. Regards, Yasha.

19.

10 February 1942

Hello Mom!

For some reason, there have been no letters from you for a long time. My life goes on as before. By order of the company’s political instructor, I conduct political studies. Today, when I was preparing for the lesson, I had to take notes on “A short

²⁹ She studied to be a nurse.

course on the history of the VKP (b)³⁰". I remembered the past, I remembered Lazar. His lessons came in handy here too. I live in a nice house with a glass window made of bottles and a stove made of a barrel (it was dragged 40 km). We built it all ourselves. I am in a unit that is famous for its carpenters. We have rebuilt a wonderful kitchen (I am enclosing a clipping from the newspaper), and our dugouts and defenses are always the best along our entire front line.

Mom, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow my life is changing. I finish my stay here and go to the front line. Mom, I won't have to go into battle soon, but I must say that the defense sector that I and my unit will occupy is, without exaggeration, the most important and dangerous in our entire front line. There are enough German shells and bullets in this area. Do not worry too much, but I consider it my duty to warn you that now I will be almost in battle. Well, bye.

I kiss you hard, hello to everyone, Yasha.

20.

13 February 1942

Hello Mom! There have been no letters from you for a long time. I am sitting in a dugout – a burrow, and I am writing this letter. Mom, here I am again experiencing the sensations and moods of a person going into battle. The enemy is several

³⁰ All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks). The so-called Short Course was an important ideological book in the Former Soviet Union at that time.

hundred meters away from us. We always wear masked coats, crawl during the day because we are in a completely open area, with heavy fire. So far, no shells have hit the dugouts though everything around them has been dug up, and all the trees have been swept away. I am here today for the second day. I must say, the mood is bad. Unaccustomed to such tension.

Then bye! Regards, Yasha.

PS Last time I washed my face was on the 10th. As you can see, I have not gotten into a rut yet.

By the way, our defense is not bad. No worse than yours near Moscow. But, on the other hand, the site is important. I'm sure the Germans won't get through here! Yasha.

21.

25 February 1942

Hello Mom!

For a long time, there have been no letters from you. I worry. I have already written to you about the changes in my army life. I'm already used to the new environment. As before, I conduct conversations with the soldiers, publish "Combat Leaflet", etc. Now there is no longer a day that I do not wash my face! Our conditions are as follows: the German sits on a hill and looks at us as if on a saucer, for the entire forest has been swept away by artillery fire. We live at night and sleep during the day. If you need to go somewhere day or night, you still must wear a camouflage coat. You walk like a woman in a skirt.

However, even in a camouflage coat you should not walk but crawl. Between us – if you need to get rid of excessive liquid, you have to put on a camouflage coat and crawl out on all fours to the proper place. Fun!!! Shells have already entered the daily routine. I can handle them well compared to others. True, here the other day a blow-off shell exploded four steps away from me. But I managed to lie down in a snowdrift and thus escaped safely, only a shrapnel made a hole in my sheepskin coat.

Well, what else to write about?

Yes, I almost forgot. On the 23rd of February, I was on honor watch. I wrote a note about this in the “Combat Leaflet”. The political instructor really liked it and sent it to the front newspaper. If they print it, I’ll cut it out and send it.

The 22nd of February marked eight months of the war. The 23rd of February marked exactly six months of my stay at the front line. The 24th of February marked nine months of my army life. Here is such a cluster of significant dates. Now I am looking forward to the newspapers with reports on the celebration of the glorious anniversary of the Red Army.

Well, how is your life going there? From the newspapers it follows that the Moscow region is being rebuilt to restore the economy and prepare for sowing. I think that the Red Army will soon give the opportunity to do this to all our cities and villages, which today have not yet been cleared of the German fascist infection.

Write down what's new.

Mom, and yet sometimes it hurts that Sergei and Lyalya are so busy that they cannot write, even one letter at a time. Sometimes it is insulting to tears.

I have no paper or envelopes.

Then bye. Wait for me with victory. See you soon after the defeat of the lousy Nazis.

Regards, Yasha.

22.

Lyalya, hello! When you saw me off, you promised to write. True, I did not write either, but you can forgive me. You are not allowed. It's hard for you now, Grisha is not there, you are working, kids. Take heart, bring up a Soviet good girl from Lida and a communist fighter from Vadya.

Lyalya, if anything happens to me, surround Mom with care and love.

I think you'll find ten minutes and write a letter. Your and Sergei's silence makes me want to cry.

I'm glad for Grigory.

I will kiss Vadya and Lida when I arrive, having defeated the Germans. Now you kiss them for me!

Regards, Yasha.

Do not refuse the request – write.

Part 3: Hospital (April – June 1942)

*I seriously bothered Hitler with
my existence. Arkhangelsk.
Everyone calls me “son.”*

23.

14 April 1942

Hello Mom! Greetings to Aunt Nadya!

I have never hidden anything from you, so today I decided to write, as always, what I think. On the night from the 7th to 8th of March, i.e., just when you women were celebrating your holiday, I seriously bothered Hitler with my existence, and several fragments from an exploding mine hit me.

One fragment hit the chest, where it sits to this day. It did not touch anything, and it does not bother me. The pea-sized wound is already healed. Lungs are in full working order.

Two other fragments hit the flesh of the shoulder and bounced off (at least they weren't found anywhere). The wounds are already healed. Everything is all right here.

One fragment hit the little finger of my right hand from above and bounced off. It damaged the little finger bone. The wound is healed.

Two fragments hit the back of the hand and are sitting there.

I feel one from the side of my hand. The bones of the 3rd and 4th fingers are damaged in the palm. The wound is healed.

Mom, this list probably looks quite funny. Stop being discouraged and look at everything from a comic point of view. Imagine a twenty-year-old boy whose hands are in plaster from fingers to elbows. He is washed, wiped, fed, and covered. When he comes to the restroom, his comrades unfasten his underpants. He lies on the bed, opens his mouth three times a day in which food is put into him (as Lida and Vadya are fed) and reads a lot. He swallows a book a day. In general, he makes up for lost time. Isn't that comical?

Yesterday my plaster was removed, and I got the opportunity to eat and write on my own, which I do. It is still inconvenient to write, the little finger is a little painful. But it will pass. In general, all the wounds have healed, now I am gaining strength.

Well, that seems to be all. Now I have experienced all the delights of combat life. I have sent you a telegram. I was afraid to dictate letters: what if you think there's no hand? And now I'm writing badly but by myself!

Well, write how and what is going on. How are Lyalya, Sergei, Aunt Nadya, Lida, Vadya? Write more. Perhaps, at least now Lyalya and Sergei can write something.

Well, what else to say?

When I get better, then I will describe how these lovely young ladies carried me on a stretcher and washed me in the bath... Yesterday I danced a foxtrot with a nurse, although I was

in underpants and a shirt...

I met nurses from Moscow here. I listened with interest to stories about the December days.

Then bye. Don't worry about it. Of course, you will cry, but let it be tears of joy that everything ended well.

All is well that ends well!

Hello to Nogintsy!

I kiss you hard. Yasha.

PS When I get the strength, I will go to Hitler to avenge my scratches.

Write, Yasha.

My address: Arkhangelsk, PO Box No. 675/3.

24.

20 April 1942

Nadya, hello! On the 4th of April I sent a telegram, but so far, I have not received an answer. Although I know that nothing could have happened to you all, I am still worried. Listen, restless Aunt, are you studying to be a nurse? It's smart. I wish you success. Mom, of course, is still sewing. Now, when I have the opportunity to listen to the radio, I often remember my table, books, good evenings, and the sound of mom's sewing machine on the side...

Well, okay, stop doing the lyrics.

Nadya, I wrote a letter to Mom the other day. Now I am somewhat confused by one circumstance. The fact is that I, if

I may speak so, having seized upon the opportunity to write, outlined all my scratches there. I am afraid you may think that it really hurt me badly.

The fact is that the mines that the Germans throw are torn into many small fragments, which have a relatively small force. When the mine was flying, I didn't lie down but only bent down. This is either unnecessary "heroism" or rather just a habit to these gifts of lousy Fritzes. However, be that as it may, but the hail of fragments got to me. Shrapnel scratched my shoulder and chest. They were not even found in the shoulder: they bounced off. Here's armor!!! Although the fragment sits in my chest, it did not touch anything and went under the skin to the collarbone. A little more serious is the case with the hands. On the right hand the little finger was damaged, which is now "not controlled". And on the left, there are fractures of the 3rd and 4th fingers. I looked at the image. There are cracks in the bones. The plaster cast, which was on my hands (up to the elbows), was now removed, but a splint was bandaged on my left hand for immobility.

The treatment is hand baths, light massage, and finger gymnastics. The wounds have all healed, it's just the fingers. Well, now I hope you see that my many wounds (seven fragments hit me) are not worth a penny. Mom, of course, no matter what I write, will still consider me a great sufferer, but you, as a person of medicine, can assess everything sensibly and, this is between us, well, of course you will say "thank God." Have I guessed? Well, of course I guessed it.

Now, if only, Nadya, you saw me in March. Here's fun. I could not strain my neck muscles because of a wound in the chest: it hurts. As a result, I could not raise my head even a millimeter from the pillow. Sometimes you turn your head, and your ear will turn up. Well, I did not call a nurse every time to "twist my ear", so they always burned in the morning, well, just torment.

And my hands were in plaster, so they fed me. You know, when they brought semolina porridge and I opened my mouth, in which they stuck it into me, every time I remembered how Lyalya used to feed Lida or Vadya. Hilarious! Now my life is back on track. Every other day I watch a movie in the next room. Yesterday I went for a walk with a nurse. I looked at Arkhangelsk. There is mud here now, the river has not yet opened up. The Fritzes never flew here. I enjoyed absorbing the features of the city life during the war, because I have been in a city for the first time since May.

With a friend, I thought of the following thing. In the city in the cinema there is "Defense of Tsaritsyn". Tomorrow, we want to go for a walk and climb there, which is generally not allowed.

There were female students of 9th grade of an Arkhangelsk' school in the hospital. They have medical internships here. I enjoyed talking to them. I plunged into my beloved, at the same time close and distant school life. It turned out that in some ways I was already outdated. Young people look at many things differently. OK, I'll catch up.

Now I read a lot. But I just don't understand what interests me. I liked Podyachev. Read "My Life." Indeed, "to live life is not to just cross the field."

What else? We are 15 people in the room. The food is good. This morning there was a potato with fried cod. For lunch, meat noodles and buckwheat porridge with meat cutlet. Yesterday we had pancakes with sour cream for dinner. In the morning and evening for tea, 15 g of butter. In general – the grace of God.

Yesterday I listened to a rally "in defense of children." When a mother talked about her 16-year-old tortured son, I swallowed tears with her.

Well, that's enough for now. It's still unusual to write. The little finger interferes.

Yes, Nadya, I received a letter from Zhenya Khapulin's mother and did not have time to answer. She asks if I have learned anything new about Zhenya. Tell her there is nothing new. I ask you to go to her. I won't write to her separately then. Hint to her that I have nothing new to say. I will personally report some details of his death.

Nadya, how do you all live there? Hello to Lyalya with the kids. It hurts that she didn't bother to drop me a line. I wrote to her an hour before the injury and left it in the dugout. I don't know if the comrades sent it. Maybe at least now she can write a little bit.

I kiss you and mom hard.

Regards, Yasha.

PS To your medical heart: the doctor said that my lungs are so healthy “that God grant everyone.” Of course, this is the most precious thing for you.

Write, maybe the letter will find me in the hospital. Hello to Nogintsy. Yasha.

Address: Arkhangelsk PO Box No. 675/3.

Nadya, I completely forgot to write. Ammargen is used to treat in the hospital. Doctors speak well of it.

Only now has the doctor prescribed a new treatment for me: paraffin therapy. It's kind of like mud therapy. The hands are lubricated with heated liquid paraffin, and when it cools down, they remove it. I have to take 30 sessions. Today – the first.

And Pyotr Irmalaich is probably happy that his Ammargen is working for defense.³¹

Well, all the best.

Sorry about the handwriting. It is unusual to write with an unbendable little finger. Yasha.

25.

22 April 1942

Hello Mom!

Yesterday I received your letter sent in response to my

³¹ Aunt of Sergei Balashov's wife worked for Professor Pyotr Ermolaevich Ermolaev, who developed ammargen, an ammonia silver compound (Ermolaev, P.E., Proceedings of the 1st MGMI, 1935, No. 4, pp. 6—16; Ermolaev, P.E., Proceedings of the 1st MGMI, 1936, No. 8, pp. 5—40).

telegram. I was wounded on the 7th of March at 11 pm, i.e., almost a month before the time I sent the telegram, but I could not write to you earlier due to the following circumstances: firstly my hands were in plaster from fingers to elbows, so I could not write on my own, and I was afraid to dictate a letter because you might have thought that I was with one foot in the grave, besides, dictation of the letter (I wrote to the guys at the front) is the most difficult thing for me. I always write all my thoughts and do not tolerate a template, dictating my thoughts was torture for me, during which I sweated mercilessly. An honest word.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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