CHAPTER THE FIRST

On the thousand-rouble son

On the fourteenth day of July 1924, when the tchinovniks of the Ministry of Winter came for me, on the evening of that day, on the eve of my Siberian odyssey, only then did I begin to suspect that I did not exist.

Beneath feather quilt, beneath three blankets and an old gabardine overcoat, in fustian long johns and wool-knit sweater, in socks pulled over socks – feet only protruding from under quilt and blankets – thawed out at last after ten or more hours of sleep, curled almost into a ball, head wedged under pillow in its thick pillowcase, so that sounds reached me already mellowed, warmed, wax-coated, like ants trapped in resin: slowly and with great effort they forced their way in, through sleep and through pillow, little by little, word by word:

'Gospodin Venyedikt Yeroslavsky.'

'The same.'

'Asleep?'

'Yes, Ivan Ivanovitch. Asleep.'

One voice then another, the first low and husky, the second low and sing-song; before I lifted blanket and eyelid, I already saw them bending over me, the husky one by my head, the sing-song one at my feet, my tsarist angels.

'We have woken young Master Venyedikt,' declared Ivan when I raised a second eyelid. He nodded to Biernatowa; the landlady obediently forsook the chamber.

Ivan drew up a low stool and sat down; he kept his knees together and on his knees a black bowler with narrow brim. His high starched vatermörder collar, white as snow in the afternoon sun, dazzled my eyes, white vatermörder and white clerical cuffs blinding against the solid black background of their uniforms. I kept blinking.

'If you'll allow us, Venyedikt Filipovitch.'

They allowed themselves. The other sat at the foot of my bed, dragging down the quilt with his weight, so I had to let go. Clutching in turn at the blankets, I rose on my pallet, thereupon exposing my back; the cold air stole under my sweater and long johns, I shuddered, wide awake.

I flung my overcoat over my shoulders and drew up my knees under my chin.

They watched me in amusement.

'How's your health?'

I cleared my throat. A night-time phlegm had accumulated in my gorge, a corrosive acid resulting from the combined contents of my stomach, garlic sausage, gherkins, whatever else we had ingested the previous day, warm dogwood vodka and cigarettes, a great many cigarettes. I leaned towards the wall and coughed violently into the spitting-box. Till I was bent double. Bent double, I went on hacking for a while.

I wiped my mouth on the torn sleeve of the overcoat.

'Oxlike.'

'That's good, good, we were afraid you wouldn't get out of bed.'

I got up. My pocketbook lay on the windowsill, stuffed behind a dead geranium in a pot. I took out my bumaga and thrust it under Ivan's nose.

He spared it not a glance.

'But my dear Gospodin Yeroslavsky! Think you we're some type of lowly beat constables?' He straightened his back still further on the stool; I had thought it impossible, but he straightened it further until the walls appeared crooked, the wardrobe hunchedbacked, the doorframe scoliotic; offended, the tchinovnik lifted his chin and puffed out his chest. 'We invite you most cordially to accompany us to Miodowa Street, for tea and sweetmeats, the commissioner always has his sorbets, petit fours, cream horns delivered straight from Semadeni, real overindulgence of the palate, if I may so put it – what say you, Kirill?'

'You may, Ivan Ivanovitch, by all means,' Kirill replied in his singsong lilt.

Ivan Ivanovitch had a bushy, heavily pomaded moustache with upward-curling tips; Kirill, on the other hand, was entirely clean-shaven. Ivan took a watch on a tangled chain out of his waistcoat pocket and announced it was five minutes to five, Commissioner Preiss was a stickler for punctuality, and what time was he going for dinner? He had arranged to meet the major general at the Hotel Francuski.

Kirill offered Ivan some snuff, Ivan offered Kirill a cigarette; they watched me as I dressed. I plunged my face into the basin of icy water. The stove tiles were cold. I turned up the lamp-wick. The room's only window looked out onto a poky yard, the glass panes so encrusted with grime and hoarfrost that even at midday very little sunlight filtered through. As I shaved – was still shaving – I had to stand the lamp in front of the mirror and turn the flame up full. Zygmunt had parted

company with his razor immediately on arrival in Warsaw and cultivated a beard worthy of an Orthodox priest. I glanced at his bedding on the far side of the stove. On Mondays he had lectures and had doubtless risen at dawn. On Zygmunt's bed lay the black fur shubas of the tchinovniks, their gloves, a cane and a scarf. The table meanwhile was piled high with dirty crocks, bottles (empty), books, magazines and jotters; Zygmunt liked to dry his socks and undergarments by hanging them over the edge of the table, secured by anatomical atlases and Latin dictionaries. And in the middle of the table, on top of a well-thumbed, grease-stained copy of Riemann's *Über die Hypothesen welche der Geometrie zu Grunde liegen* and a heap of yellowing back issues of the *Warsaw Courier* – kept as kindling or for plugging cracks expanded by the frost or for dehumidifying shoes, but also as wrapping for butterschnitten – soared a two-tiered colonnade of wax candles and candle stubs, the ruins of some stearin Parthenon. Against the wall opposite the stove, meanwhile, towered level stacks of hardbound volumes arranged according to format and size or frequency of reading. A gorget with an image of Our Lady of the Gate of Dawn, hanging on the sooty wall above the books – the only relic of the previous tenants, whom Biernatowa had evicted onto the street because of their 'unbecoming conduct' – had turned thoroughly black and now resembled more a mediaeval breastplate for Lilliputians. Ivan scrutinised it for a long time, with great concentration, seated stiffly on the stool, left hand and cigarette thrust backwards at an angle of forty-five degrees to his body, right hand resting on his thigh beside the bowler, frowning and wrinkling his nose, ruffling his moustache – then I understood that he was practically blind, that he was an office myope; on his nose and below the eye sockets were pince-nez marks, without his pince-nez he had no choice but to rely on Kirill. They had come in directly from the frost and Ivan must have removed his spectacles. In here, my own eyes sometimes water. The air inside the lodging house is dense and heavy, scarred by every bodily odour, human or animal; no one opens the windows, doors are instantly slammed shut and cracks above the doorsteps stuffed with rags, so that no warmth escapes from the building – firewood has to be paid for, after all, anyone able to afford coal wouldn't normally be cooped up in such dark holes, where the air is dense and heavy, and you breathe it in as if you'd drunk the water spat out by your neighbour as well as by his dog, as if your every breath had previously passed a million times through the consumptive lungs of peasants, Jews, coachmen, butchers and whores; hawked up from black larynxes, it returns to you again and again, filtered through their saliva and sputum, processed through their mould-infested, louse-infected, pus-incrusted bodies, coughed up by them, blown out

through their noses, spewed up straight into your mouth, but you have to swallow it, you have to breathe it in, so breathe, breathe!

'E-excuse me.'

The privy at the end of the corridor was luckily unoccupied at that moment. I vomited into the hole, from which an icy stench blew up into my face. Cockroaches crawled from under the shit-stained boards. When they reached as far as my chin, I squashed them with my thumb.

Coming out again into the corridor, I saw Kirill standing in the doorway of our room – he had his eye on me, was standing guard, making sure I didn't escape into the frost in my long johns and sweater. I smiled knowingly. He handed me a handkerchief and pointed to my left cheek. I wiped it. When I tried to return it, he took a step back. I smiled a second time. My mouth is wide, it smiles very easily.

I donned my only presentable outfit, that is, the black suit in which I'd sat my final examinations; were it not for the layer of underlinen, it would have hung on me now as on a skeleton. The officials watched as I tied my shoelaces, buttoned my waistcoat, fought with the stiff celluloid collar attached to my last cotton shirt. I took my documents and remaining loose change, three roubles and forty-two kopecks – any bribe offered out of this would be purely symbolic, but in an office a man with empty pockets feels naked. There was nothing I could do instead about my old sheepskin coat, the patches, stains, crooked stitches, I had no other. They scrutinised me in silence as I squeezed my arms into the asymmetrical sleeves, the left one longer. I smiled apologetically. Kirill licked a pencil and scrupulously noted something on his cuff.

We left. Biernatowa was clearly watching through her half-open door – and immediately appeared alongside the tchinovniks, flushed and rattling away, in order to conduct them back down the stairs from the second floor and across both well-yards to the main gate, where the watchman Walenty, adjusting his cap with its bronze spangle and tucking his pipe into his pocket, swept the snow hurriedly from the pavement and helped the tchinovniks into their sleigh, clasping the gentlemen by the elbows so they didn't slip on the icy curb; Biernatowa, meanwhile, as the seated officials wrapped their legs in their plaids, regaled them with torrents of complaints about malign tenants, bands of Vistula-bank thieves, who break into houses even in broad daylight, as well as the merciless frosts, due to which damp window frames warp from the inside, pipes burst within walls and no plumbing and no sewage system lasts long in the ground; finally she assured them fervently that she'd long suspected me of all sorts of crimes and iniquities, and would definitely have informed the appropriate authorities were it not for the thousand and one other cares piling up on her head – until the driver, seated on his box behind Kirill's back, cracked his whip

and the horses jerked the sleigh to the left, forcing the woman to step aside, and so we moved off in the direction of the Warsaw delegation of the Ministry of Winter, to the former Palace of the Bishops of Cracow, Miodowa Street number 5, on the corner with Senatorska.

Before we turned from Koszykowa Street onto Marszałkowska, a fine snow had begun to fall; I pulled my shapka over my ears. The officials in their voluminous furs and walnut-shell bowlers, seated on the low benches of the sleigh, Ivan opposite me and Kirill with his back to the izvoztchik, resembled the beetles I had seen in one of Zygmunt's textbooks: fat oval torsos, short paws, small heads, all glossy black, enclosed within the geometrical symmetry of ellipses and circles. A shape so close to the ideal sphere, its very nature debars it from this world. They stared ahead of them with passionless gaze, mouths tightly shut and chins held high owing to their stiff collars, passively yielding to the movement of the sleigh. I thought I would glean something from them on the way. I thought they would start demanding donations in return for their goodwill, for their lack of haste and urgency. They said nothing. I shall ask them – but how? About what? They will pretend they haven't heard. Flakes of sticky snow swirled between us. I tucked my cold palms into the sleeves of my sheepskin.

Lights were burning in the Pâtisserie Française; the electric blaze beat through the great windows and spun woolly haloes around the silhouettes of passers-by. The summer sun ought still to have been standing high in the sky, but as usual heavy clouds hung over the city, the streetlamps had even been lit – very tall, with spiralled pinnacles. We turned northwards. From Ostrowski's cakeshop, at the junction with Piękna Street, some girls in red coats and white hooded capes came running out, their laughter penetrating for a moment above the hubbub of the street. I was reminded of my unfinished letter to Julia and her final questioning scream. Next door to Ostrowski's, at Wedel's, I used to arrange to meet Fredek and Kiwajs for an evening round of cards. Right here, behind the Sokół Cinema, at Kalka's, the Kind Prince used to hire a room for our night-time sessions. Were I to raise my head and look to the left, above Ivan's bowler, I would see the window on the second floor of the residential building at number 71, from which Fredek had fallen.

At the intersection with Nowogrodzka a fat cow hung frozen to a lamppost, connected by a tendon of dark ice to the top of the façade of a four-storey building. The cow must have come from the last roundup of cattle to the Ochota slaughterhouse; the hiberniks had not yet chopped it down. Further down the street, above the roof of the 'Sphinx' apartment house, there loomed a blue-black nest of ice, a vast coagulated mass of frozen matter as hard as diamond, joined by a network of icy

threads, icicles, spans and columns to the residential buildings on either side of Marszałkowska and Złota Streets – to residential buildings, lampposts, stumps of frozen trees, balustrades of balconies, bay windows, spires of cupolas and ornamental turrets, attics and chimneys. The 'Sphinx' cinema had long been closed, of course; on the topmost floors no lights were burning.

The sleigh slowed down as we passed Nowogrodzka. The driver pointed to something with his whip. The carriage in front veered onto the pavement. Kirill looked behind him. I leaned out to the right. Two policemen stood at the intersection with Jerusalem Avenue, herding the traffic away from the centre of the thoroughfare aided by whistles and shouts – for there, a gleiss was freezing its way across the road.

For a few minutes we were stuck in the congestion it had caused. Usually, gleissen translocate above the roofs, rarely coming down to earth in cities. Even at that distance I seemed to feel the waves of cold flowing off it. I shuddered and instinctively buried my chin in the collar of my sheepskin. The tchinovniks from the Ministry of Winter exchanged glances. Ivan looked at his watch. On the other side of the street, behind an advertising column covered in bills announcing a wrestling match at the Okólnik circus, a man dressed in the English style was setting up an antiquated camera in order to photograph the gleiss; his pictures would surely never appear in any newspaper, confiscated by the people from Miodowa Street. Ivan and Kirill paid him no attention.

The gleiss was exceptionally fast-moving, before dusk it should have succeeded in crossing to the other side of Marszałkowska, in the course of the night have climbed onto the rooftops, by Friday have reached the nest above the cinema. Last year, when a similar icer crossed the river from Praga to the Royal Castle via the Aleksandryjski Bridge, the bridge was closed for nearly two months. Meanwhile this glacius here – were I to wait a mere quarter of an hour, I would surely be able to perceive its movement; how it freezes from place to place, shifts position in the ice, as ice, from ice to ice, how one and then another crystal thread bursts and slowly scatters a bluish-white crumble, one minute, kshtr, two minutes, kshtr; the wind snatched up the lightest particles along with the snow, but the majority froze back into the black ice sheet that was causing street mud to congeal in the gleiss's wake, the ice of ice; meanwhile, the path of this rugged frozen mass was stretching like a huge track of snail slime fifty metres or so to the east of Jerusalem Avenue, both over the pavement and up the front elevation of an hotel. The rest had already been hacked off by the hiberniks or had thawed of its own accord; yesterday afternoon the thermometer at Schnitzer's showed five degrees above zero.

The gleiss was not moving in a straight line, nor did it maintain a constant height above the cobbles (gleissen also freeze into the ground beneath the earth's surface). Three or four hours earlier, judging by the brittle architecture of the ice, the gleiss had begun to alter its trajectory; before, it had shifted barely a metre above the middle of the street, but then, three hours ago, it had moved upwards along a sharp parabolic curve, above the pinnacles of lampposts and crowns of frozen trees. I saw the row it had left of slender stalagspikes; they glowed in the reflected light of streetlamps, in the gleam of neon colours, in the radiance streaming from windows and shop displays. The row of stalagspikes broke off above the tramlines – the gleiss hung with its whole weight upon a star-shaped network of frost-strings, spreadeagled horizontally and stretching towards the façades of the corner buildings. It was possible to walk underneath, were anyone foolhardy enough to try.

Ivan nodded to Kirill and the latter clambered out of the sleigh with a reluctant grimace on a countenance made red by the smarting cold. With a bit of luck, I thought, we'll perhaps be late, Commissioner Preiss will leave for his supper booked with the major general and they'll dismiss me from Miodowa empty-handed. Thanks to you, dear God, for that monster icicle. I shifted position on the bench and leaned my shoulder against the back of the sleigh. A newspaper vendor came running up – 'Hirohito Defeated!', 'Express Special, Myerzoff Triumphal!' I turned my head. Crowds were gathering alongside the blockages in the city centre, street hawkers appeared, sellers of cigarettes and holy water, or holy fire. Policemen were chasing pedestrians away from the gleiss, unable to protect everyone. A gang of street urchins stole up from the direction of Briesemeister's restaurant. The pluckiest, wearing a muffler wrapped around his face and thick shapeless mittens, ran within a few feet of the gleiss and flung a cat at it. The mouser flew through the air in a high arc, spreading wide its paws, howling at the top of its lungs… a terrifying shriek broke loose. It was most likely dead already when it hit the gleiss, only to slide off slowly into the snow, frozen to the marrow: an ice sculpture of a cat with splayed limbs and tail straightened like a wire. The boys ran off almost writhing with joy. A Jew with side curls shook his fist at them from the doorway of Epstein the Jeweller, swearing bitterly in Yiddish.

Kirill meanwhile had laid hands on the older policeman and, having seized him by the elbow so he didn't dash off in pursuit of the urchins, began to reason with him about something in subdued tones, but with the conspicuous assistance of sweeping gestures from his other hand. The constable averted his face, shrugged his shoulders, scratched the crown of his head. The younger of the two was shouting to his companion, get a move on, help! On Jerusalem Avenue the runners of two

sleighs had become hooked together, causing even greater hullabaloo; carriages were driving onto the pavements; pedestrians, cursing in Polish, Russian, German and Yiddish, were fleeing from under wheels and hooves; outside a wine store, a matron the size of a Danzig cupboard had tumbled on the frozen mud, three gentlemen were trying to help her up, a portly officer hastened to their aid, and so all four of them heaved together, at the count of one – she fell again – two – she fell again – three – and the whole street was splitting its sides with laughter, whilst the poor woman, red as a cherry, squealed in terror, swinging her fat little legs in their tiny boots… No wonder it took the crack of lacerated metal and splitting wood for us to look back towards the junction. An automobile had hit a coalman's cart; one horse had fallen, a wheel had come off. The policeman brushed Kirill aside and ran towards the crash. The motorist trapped inside the covered vehicle began to honk his horn; in addition, something went off beneath the bolide's bonnet as if fired from a double-barrelled shotgun. This was too much for the grey nag harnessed to the sleigh alongside us. Startled, it lurched forward straight towards the gleiss. The driver grabbed at the reins but the horse itself must have sensed into what wall of frost it fell – it reared to one side even more energetically, overturning the sleigh on the spot. Did the runner catch the curb? Did the grey nag slip on the black surface of the ice? I was already standing up in the ministerial sleigh observing the accident together with Ivan above the line of sleighs in front, but everything occurred too swiftly, too unexpectedly; there was too much movement, shouting, too many lights and darks. The grey nag had fallen, the sleigh drawn by it had overturned and shed its load – a dozen or so bulbous cylinders packed in sawdust-filled baskets; the baskets and cylinders rolled towards the middle of the junction, some must have smashed, since a shiny celadon liquid was spreading over the ice – naphtha, I thought – when fire flared up, ignited by an electric spark from the automobile, by a discarded cigarette, by an iron-shod hoof striking the cobbles – I have no idea by what. The blue flame leapt across the entire width of the puddle, tall, taller and taller still, a metre, a metre and a half high – almost reaching the gleiss frozen into the network suspended overhead.

The photographer, bent over his camera, gradually, methodically, took snap after snap. And what he'll see later will be what is captured on glass and printed on paper: snow – snow – pale haloes around streetlights – dark mud, dark cobbles, dark sky – grey elevations of residential buildings against a wide ravine of city – in the foreground, the chaos of angular vehicles held in a traffic jam – and between these and between people's silhouettes the brilliance of pure fire erupting, so intensely bright that the photographic paper in this spot appears

totally unexposed – and above this, above the white flame whiter than white, at the heart of the hanging arabesque of ice, sprawls the gleiss, the gleiss, a massive thunderbolt of cold, a star of hoarfrost, a living bonfire of chill, the gleiss, the gleiss, the gleiss above ladies' fur toques, the gleiss above men's caps and bowlers, the gleiss above horses' heads and carriage hoods, the gleiss above the neon lights of coffee houses and salons, boutiques and hotels, pâtisseries and fruit shops, the gleiss above Marszałkowska Street and Jerusalem Avenue, the gleiss above Warsaw, the gleiss above the Russian Empire.

As we drove later towards the Saxon Garden and along Królewska Street, past the Garden itself, lifeless beneath longstanding permafrost, and the colonnade strung with icicles, past towers covered in snowy overhangs and the Russian Orthodox cathedral on Saxon Square, towards the thoroughfare of Krakowskie Przedmieście, that picture – the afterimage of that picture and what it represented – came back to me again and again, an insistent memory of obscure significance, a sight seen but not understood.

The officials exchanged gruff remarks under their breath, the driver shouted at inattentive passers-by; the snowstorm had abated, but the day was growing colder and colder; my breath, suspended in a white cloudlet before my face, froze on my lips; the sweat-covered horses moved forward in clouds of sticky damp – the Royal Castle drew closer and closer. Before the turning onto Miodowa Street, I caught a glimpse of it above the Zygmunt Column: the Castle encased in a block of shadowy ice – and a great nest of gleissen positioned above it. A purplish-black, clotted mass stretched over half the rooftops of the Old Town. On sunny days, around the Great Tower, it was possible to see waves of cold stood upright in the air. No thermometer has a scale capable of measuring such cold. On the boundary of Castle Square, gendarmes keep watch by their bonfires. Whenever a gleiss freezes its way out of the nest, they close off the streets. A cordon of dragoons from the Fourteenth Malorossiysky Regiment had been stationed there by the governor general, but the regiment had been expedited in the meantime to the Japanese front.

The rooftop of the Palace of the Bishops of Cracow, however, remained free of icy accretions. Stylish shops still occupied the annexes entered by way of Senatorska Street – electric floodlights illuminated the displays for Nikolay Shelekhoff's Exclusive Delicatessen and teas from Sergey Vasilyevitch Perloff's Moscow Trading House – but the main wing, entered from the Miodowa side, with its rococo finials, pilasters and Corinthian capitals, was the property of the Ministry of Winter. Above both entrance gates hung the two-headed black eagles under their Romanoff crowns, incrusted with onyx tungetitum.

We drove into the inner courtyard, the runners of the sleigh scraping the cobblestones. The officials alighted first, Ivan immediately vanished through a door, planting the tsviker on his nose; Kirill stood on the steps before the threshold and turned in my direction. I opened my mouth. He raised his eyebrows. I looked down. We entered.

The janitor relieved me of my sheepskin and cap whilst the warden pushed towards me a great ledger in which I had to sign in two places; the pen slipped from my fingers, stiff from the cold: should I sign for you, sir, no, no, I can do it myself. Illiterate plebs also darken the corridors of the Directorate of Winter.

Everything here sparkled with cleanliness: marble, parquet, glass, crystal and the rainbow sheen of coldiron. Kirill led me up the main staircase and through two secretariats. On the walls, beneath portraits of Nikolay the Second Aleksandrovitch and Piotr Rappacki, hung sunlit landscapes of steppe and forest, Saint Petersburg in spring and Moscow in summer, from the days when spring and summer still had access to them. The secretaries did not raise their heads from their desks, but I saw how councillors, administrators, clerks and scribes followed me with their eyes and then exchanged oblique glances. At what hour does the clerking end? The Ministry of Winter never sleeps.

Commissioner Extraordinary Preiss V.V. occupied a spacious office with antique masonry stove and disused fireplace, the high windows of which looked out onto Miodowa Street and Castle Square. When I entered, crossing paths in the doorway with Ivan, who had clearly just announced me, the commissioner was busying himself with the samovar, his back turned. He too had the figure of a samovar, bulging pear-shaped torso and small bald head. He moved with phrenetic energy, hands flapping above the table, whilst his feet never stopped dancing, step to the left, step to the right – I was sure he was humming to himself under his breath, smiling under his breath, merry eyes looking out upon the world from a ruddy countenance; the smooth forehead of the Commissioner of Winter unfrowning. In the meantime, since he failed to turn around, I stood by the door, arms folded behind back, letting the warm air fill my lungs, wash over my skin, thaw the blood congealed in my veins. In the office it was almost hot, the great painted majolica stove never cooling for one moment; the window-panes eventually misted over so much that through them I saw mainly the blurred rainbows of streetlamps, strangely flooding and pouring down the glass. It is a matter of great political importance that within the Ministry of Winter, cold never prevails.

'Well, why don't you sit down, Venyedikt Filipovitch? Have a seat. Have a seat.'

Ruddy face, merry eyes.

I took a seat.

Sighing audibly, he slumped into a chair on the far side of the desk, cradling in his palms the porcelain cup of steaming tchay. (He did not offer me any.) He had not been overlong in charge, the desk was not his; behind it he looked like a child playing at being a minister, definitely minded to change the furniture. They must have sent him only recently, the tsarist commissioner extraordinaire, sent – from where? From Saint Petersburg, from Moscow, from Yekaterinburg, from Siberia?

I took a deeper breath.

'If Your Esteemed Nobleness will permit… Am I under arrest?'

'Arrest? Arrest? Whence such an idea?'

'Your officials –'

'My officials!'

'Had I received a summons, I would myself –'

'Did they not invite you courteously, Mr Gierosławski?' He, at last, pronounced my name correctly.

'I thought –'

'Bozhe moy! Under arrest!'

He was panting.

I clasped my knee in my hands. It's worse than I'd imagined. They're not going to throw me into gaol. A high-ranking tsarist official wishes to have a *conversation* with me.

He began taking papers out of the desk. A fat wad of roubles. Official stamps. Perspiration streamed over my body neath my undergarments.

'Ye-es.' Preiss slurped his tchay loudly. 'Kindly accept our condolences.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Last year your mother died, no?'

'Yes, in April.'

'You were left alone. I am sorry. A man without a family is like… well, he's alone. That's bad, oy, bad.' He turned over a leaf of paper, slurped, turned over the next leaf.

'I have a brother,' I muttered.

'Yes, yes, brother by birth, at the ends of the earth. Where did he go, Brazil?'

'Peru.'

'Peru! And what might he do in Peru?'

'Build churches.'

'Churches! Writes often, no doubt.'

'More often than I.'

'Nice. He must miss you.'

'Must.'

'And you don't miss…?'

'Him?'

'Your family. When did you last hear from your father?' Leaf of paper, leaf of paper, slurp.

Father. I knew it. What else could it be?

'We don't correspond, if that's what you mean.'

'Dreadful, oy, dreadful. Don't you care if he's alive?'

'Is he?'

'Ah! Is Filip Filipovitch Gierosławski alive! Is he alive!' Preiss sprang up from behind his theatrical desk. By the wall stood a large globe on a lightweight pedestal made of wet coldiron, on the wall hung a map of Asia and Europe; he rotated the globe and slapped the back of his hand against the map.

When he turned back to look at me, not the slightest trace remained on his chubby cheeks of his recent jollity; his dark eyes stared with clinical concentration.

'Is he alive,' he whispered.

He picked up the yellowed papers from his desk.

'Filip Gierosławski, son of Filip, born in the year eighteen hundred and seventy-eight at Wilkówka in the Kingdom of Prussia, in East Prussia, Heilsberg District; since nineteen hundred and five a Russian subject, husband of Eulagia, father of Bolesław, Benedykt and Emilia, sentenced to death in nineteen hundred and seven for his part in a plot against the life of His Imperial Exaltedness, as well as armed rebellion; well, by way of reprieve, the sentence was commuted to fifteen years' hard labour with deprivation of nobility rights and sequestration of property. In nineteen seventeen he was granted amnesty with a prikaz to reside for the remainder of his life within the General Governorate of Amur and Irkutsk. He didn't write? Never?'

'To my mother. Perhaps. At the beginning.'

'But now? Recently? Since seventeen. Not at all?'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'I am sure you know better than I when he writes and to whom.'

'No insolence, young man!'

I smiled weakly.

'Apologies.'

He scrutinised me for a long time. On a finger of his left hand he wore a ring with a dark stone set in precious tungetitum, engraved with the emblem of Winter; he rapped the ring on the desktop, trook, trookk, even raps stronger than odd.

'You graduated from the Imperial University. What are you doing now?'

'Preparing for the rigorosum – '

'Supporting yourself on what?'

'Private lessons in mathematics.'

'And you make much on such lessons?'

Since I had already been smiling, all I could do now was lower my eyes onto my clenched hands.

'Much, not much.'

'You're a regular guest of the moneylenders; all the shylocks on Nalewki Street know you. To Abiezer Blumstein alone you owe upward of three hundred roubles. Three hundred roubles! Is it true?'

'Were Your Esteemed Nobleness to state on what matter I'm being interrogated, it might be easier to confess.'

Trook, trookk, trook, trookk.

'Or maybe you really have committed some crime, for you to sweat out your fear so profusely, eh?'

'Perhaps Your Esteemed Nobleness would deign to open a window.'

He stood over me; had no need even to expressly stoop to talk straight into my ear, first a whisper, then a soldier's bark, eventually little less than a scream.

'You are a gambler, my Benedykt, an inveterate card player. Whatever you win, you lose – whatever you earn, you lose – whatever you borrow, you lose – whatever you beg from friends, you lose – you no longer have any friends – no longer have anything, yet you lose even that, you lose everything. Pontoon, baccarat, blizzarder, poker, anything will do. Once you won half a sawmill and lost it the very same night. You have to lose; you can't rise from the table without losing so utterly that no one wants to play with you. No one wants to play with you anymore, Venyedikt Filipovitch. No one wants to lend to you anymore. Your entire life is indebted for two years ahead. Bolesław doesn't write to you; it is you who write to him, begging for money, but he won't send more. You don't write to your father because your father has no money. You wanted to get married, but your father-in-law-not-to-be set his dogs on you when you pledged your betrothed's dowry and lost it. Had you at least blown your brains out as befits a noble-born, but you won't do it, tphoo, that's the kind of scum noble you are!'

I continued to smile apologetically.

Commissioner Preiss heaved a sigh, after which he clapped me amicably on the shoulder.

'There now, never fear! We also fraternise with scum. It's of no consequence to us that you're as little interested in your father's fate as in the Emperor of Japan's gout – on the other hand, you are interested in a thousand roubles! Am I right? A thousand roubles interest you like… well, they interest you very much. We will give you a thousand, and maybe a second thousand later, if you perform well. You are going to visit your father.'

Here he fell silent, obviously anticipating a reply. As he received none, he returned to his desk and steaming tchay (it had cooled slightly, so now he slurped longer and louder), to his papers and stamps. Wielding a massive pen, he entered his signature on a document, struck it with a stamp, corrected it with a second; satisfied with what he had done, he rubbed his diminutive hands together and sat back in the leather armchair.

'Here are your passport and orders to our delegation in Irkutsk, they'll look after you on the ground. They purchased the ticket at once, you leave tomorrow for Moscow, otherwise you won't catch the Siberian Express – today is the first of July, your ticket is for the fifth, departure is at ten in the evening from the Yaroslavsky Station, you'll be in Irkutsk on the eleventh, there they'll put you on the Winter Line to Kezhma. Here you have a thousand, sign the receipt. Buy yourself some decent clothes so you look human! And should it occur to you to take the money and lose it all at cards – on second thoughts, lose it if you must, so long as you reach Baikal. Come on, sign!'

A thousand roubles. What are they expecting me to do there? Drag out of my father names not betrayed at his trial? So why is the Ministry of Winter turning to me with this and not the Ministry of Internal Affairs?

'I will go,' I said. 'Visit my father. What else? Is that it?'

'Talk to him.'

'I'll talk to him.'

'And when you talk to him, well, then it will be all right.'

'I don't understand, what Your Esteemed Nobleness…'

'He sent no letters, but you're not surprised, why should you be, ha?' Commissioner Preiss opened a baize- and tortoiseshell-embossed briefcase. 'Irkutsk informs us… He was a geologist, is that right?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Filip Filipovitch studied geology. He continued to pursue it in Siberia. Here I am informed… From the beginning he was very close; then his convict work gang was attached to the second or third expedition that went there in the spring of nineteen ten. The majority perished from frostbite. Or froze to death on the spot. He survived. Then he returned. To them. I don't believe it myself, but that's what they write to me here. They have given the order, given the money, so now I am sending the man. Your father converses with gleissen.'