

VICTOR: A Soldier's Story

VICTOR:

A Soldier's Story

A graphic memoir

Written by Luba Ostashevsky & Eugene Ostashevsky

Illustrated by Igor Karash

VICTOR:

A Soldier's Story

A graphic memoir
written by Luba Ostashevsky
& Eugene Ostashevsky
Illustrated by Igor Karash

PROLOGUE:

The Grandfather We Didn't Know



There we are, me and Zhenya, ages 7 and 10. It's our last summer before emigrating from the Soviet Union. We spend it in a township outside of Leningrad. We are there with our grandmother, a new widow who makes hot porridge for us every morning. It's coarse and lumpy – she is a terrible cook – but filling.

We are the well-fed and healthy children of the Soviet seventies. That summer we tasted our first mango. We have read about mangos but we've never seen one in real life, and it tastes like nothing we've ever eaten. We are there to say goodbye to our grandmother, who is not emigrating with us.

During the school year, we lead a charmed existence in Leningrad, formerly Saint-Petersburg, the one-time capital of the Russian Empire, built by Italian, French and Russian architects in the delta of the vast Neva river. Our windows face a building with large stucco figures of men half-buried in the wall but holding up the balcony. Our street runs from the park built for Peter the Great to the park built for the favorite of Catherine the Great. Every other Sunday we go to the Hermitage, one of the most famous art museums in the world. Our mother recounts the myths that the museum's Greek and Roman statues illustrate. Zhenya makes himself a cape and a shield to be like a Greek hero. In the summer we go to the countryside north of the city. The whole family rents a room or two in a village the Soviets

seized from the Finns by the part of the Baltic Sea called the Gulf of Finland. The land is fairly flat, the soil is sandy and covered with pine forests. My grandmother teaches me how to spot edible mushrooms: varieties of boletus, including the prized "white mushroom" or cep, and russula, which you can eat raw. My other grandmother, my mother's mother, who will eventually emigrate with us, takes us blueberry picking. Blueberries do not grow on bushes there, but on low lying shrubs. In winter,

the city, and especially its environs, are covered by snow. We have a children's sled made of wooden slats on metal runners. I remember the terror—then the exhilaration—of going down the one hill in the park associated with Catherine the Great, or the many more hills in the countryside. The sled has a rope in front, so that an adult can pull us when we get tired. A photo

survives of Zhenya on a sled being pulled by our grandmothers. We soon learn that children's sleds like that one came in handy during the Blockade.

They were used to transport those who could no longer walk: the starving, the sick, and the dead. As children, we know much more about the Blockade—the cold, the famine, the nightly shelling – than anyone now might consider normal. But stories about the Blockade are our normal. We do not think it is strange to come from a city that lived through something so devastating. The Blockade, or the siege of Leningrad, lasted from September of 1941 –



to January of 1944. In a city of 3 million, over a million died. Memories of the Blockade are still all around us more than thirty years later. Signs in courtyards still point to bomb shelters. Street signs advise: "Citizens! This side of the street is more dangerous under artillery fire than the other." Both our grandmothers lost their families to hunger and cold.

One of our first books is called **The Road of Life**. It is a children's book, full of photographs.

It tells how, starting in the winter of 1942, the Red Army managed to truck food supplies over the thick ice of Lake Ladoga to the city and to evacuate civilians on the way back. The truckers drove mostly at night, with their lights turned off to avoid bombers and artillery. Some trucks, and the people in them, fell through the ice. Our mother's mother and her brother Misha

were evacuated from the city in one such truck, but it was too late for Misha. He was so weak from hunger, that he died after the crossing. Our father's uncle, Olya, also died in the blockade. He was killed while being mugged for a piece of bread.

In the Leningrad of the 1970s, stories about the siege are useful. They encourage people to trust and respect the government. They prevent children from becoming finicky eaters. We are not finicky eaters, which is good, because there really aren't that many food choices around. Our paternal grandmother was not in the city during the Blockade. She



left on the last train out and joined our grandfather in the Urals, where he was a mining engineer specializing in the extraction of colored metals. He was too valuable to be drafted. We grew up with this grandfather. He called us "grandpa's little avengers" and said we were paying our father back for all the trouble he had caused as a child. He called Zhenya "the capitalist" because he was a fat baby. This grandfather had diabetes and we watched him inject insulin into his belly. What do we

know about him, now that we are adults? We know he was honest, because he was too poor for somebody with his job. We do not know whether his mines ran on prison-camp labor during the war, but who else would be working in the mines then? He never said a word about his work. The Communist Party expelled him when we applied to emigrate because he

had brought up a disloyal son, and he died of a heart attack two days later.

But we also had another grandfather. His name was Victor Torkanovsky. He was not part of the family. He and our mother's mother divorced when our mother was an infant. We saw little of him. The photo on the facing page is how he looked right before the war started. He eventually became a professor at the Leningrad Institute of Economics and Finance, a specialist in, of all things, the capitalist stock market. He remarried and had a son. He helped his daughter, our mother, out a few times but, in general, they had almost no relationship.

I don't remember him from when I was a child, and all Zhenya remembers is the toy tank he got on his fifth birthday. Our life changed in 1979. As Jews, our family was allowed to emigrate. Our father's father died, we said goodbye to our grandmother who was his widow, and to the rest of our family and flew to Vienna with our maternal grandmother. From Vienna we took the train to Italy and, after a couple of months spent alternately as refugees at a coastal town near Rome and as penniless tourists visiting Roman and Renaissance sites, flew to New New York. Our parents found jobs. We rented an apartment near the Kings Highway subway station in Brooklyn. We went shopping in our first American supermarket, its shelves stocked with an unimaginable variety of different colored food. We went to a new school. We learned to speak English. We

had other things than the siege to think about. It reclaimed us long after we became adults. By then, the Soviet Union was no more. Leningrad was renamed, or else un-named, to Saint-Petersburg. We were allowed to travel back there now, and we did, a few times. Although we were, technically, "from there," I could not pass for a native, while Zhenya could only sometimes. We wanted to understand what the "there" was that we were ostensibly "from." Or was New York where we were "from"? Why does the word "from" always come in a crown of scare quotes? Is it because we're Jewish? We wanted to understand *our* history. Was it even our history? Zhenya,



who kept getting confused even about who was related to whom, wanted documents and evidence. He was angry at himself for not having had the presence of mind to record our grandmothers when they were still alive. By the time we thought of it, all three of our grandparents were dead. Only Victor was left.

In the intervening years he and our mother had softened toward each other. When we visited, he would try to see his daughter and his

American grandchildren. We gradually came to think of him as part of our family, more and more so as the family we had left behind slowly disappeared.

My brother bought a microphone for his cell phone and went to Russia again. Our grandfather, then in his 80s, still lived in his apartment in the

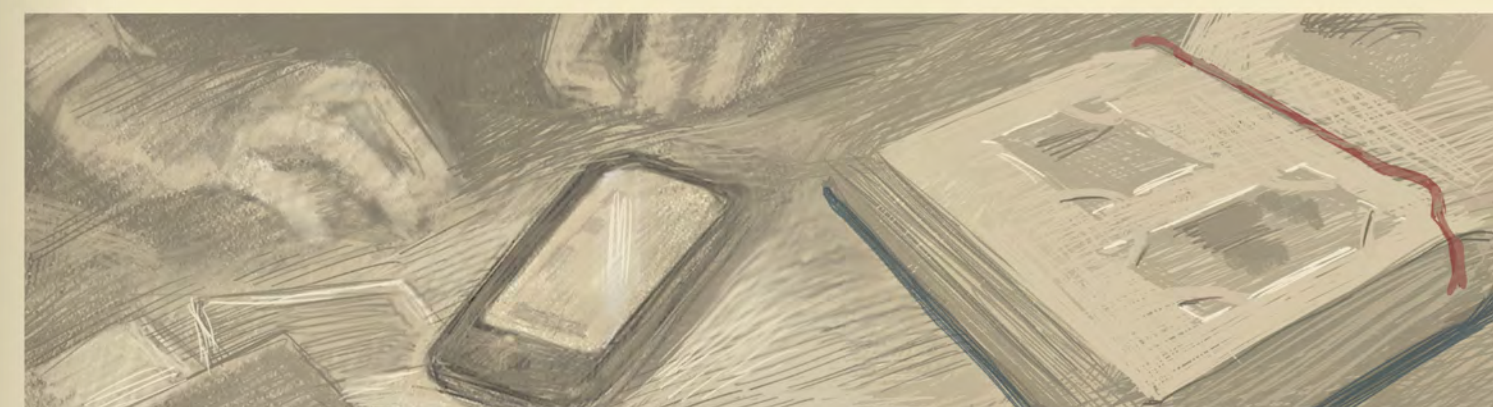
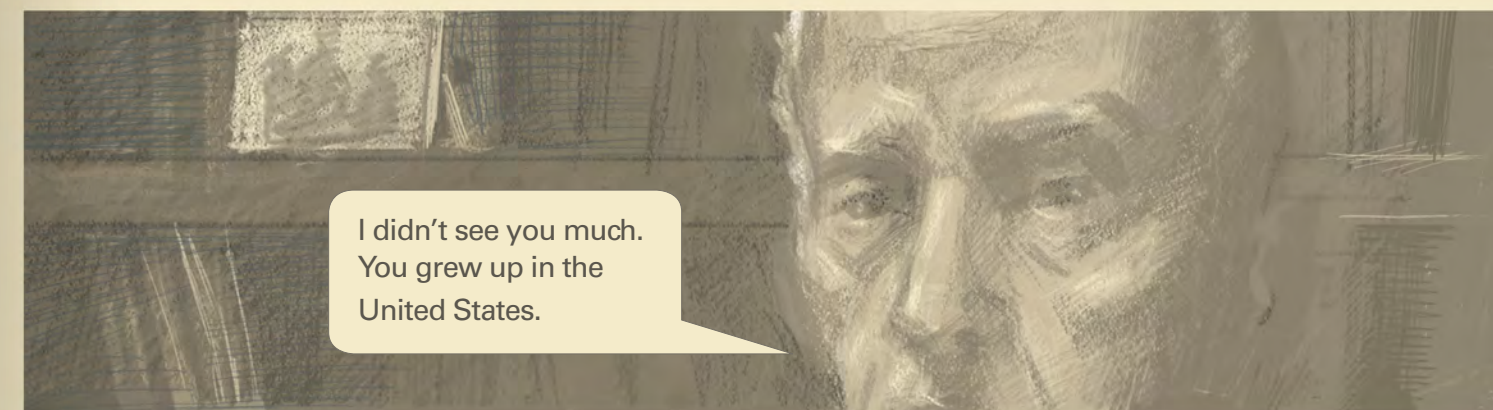
west of the city, in the old Admiralty neighborhood, striped with rivers and canals. Victor could have told Zhenya anything, but he chose to talk about the war and his experience in it. The war was the most intense and by far the most meaningful experience of his life. It towered above his childhood, his marriages, his scholarship, even his post-war interrogations by the political police. It made him who he was, as perhaps our emigration made us.

He talked about it like those few Greeks who came home from Troy talked about their war. And this is what he said.



PART I: LENINGRAD

I'll tell you what I remember
so that when I am gone, you could
share it with your children.



CHAPTER 1
War Breaks Out



It was the Sunday before exam week at the university. I was cramming for my political economy final. Father and Mother were out.



And the proletariat will control the means of production...



I had a lot to study so I kept the radio off.



When I turned it on...



This is Comrade Molotov speaking. We are at war. I repeat, We are at war.



I ran to the University as fast as I could.



A few people who hadn't heard were still strolling about.



Others stood silently around the large radio speakers that dotted the city.



The security guard was still at her desk in the library.





Grishka, this is
no time to study.
We are at war!



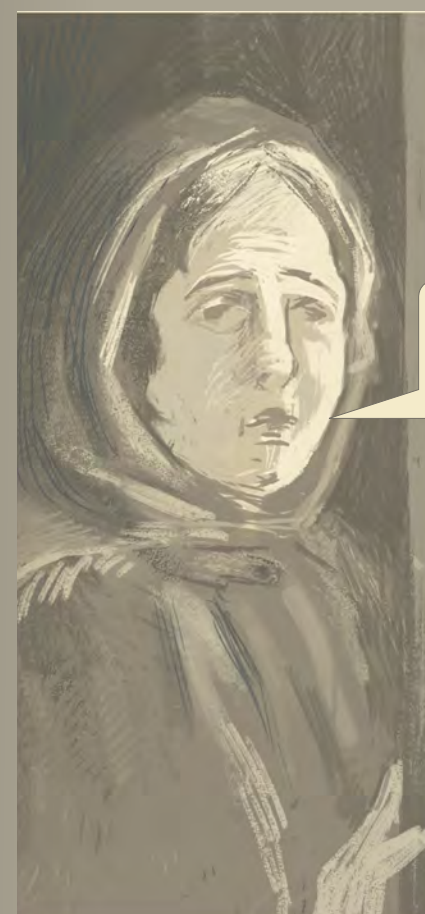
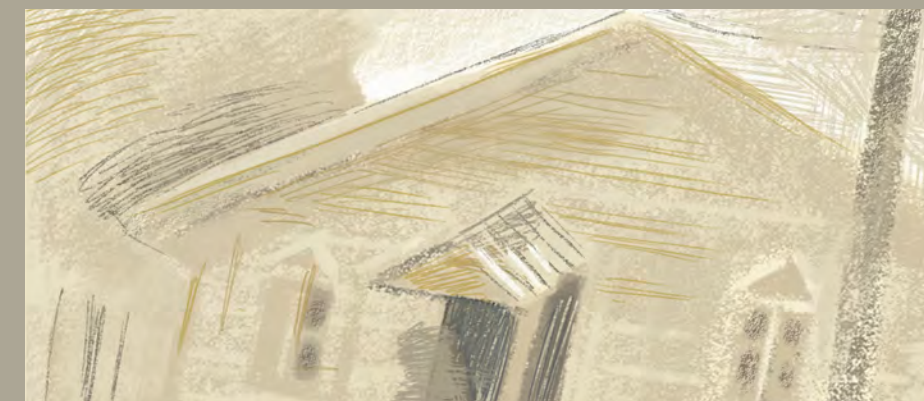
We are at war!
The Germans are
bombing Kiev!



Gimme a break!

Let's go
to tell Boris!

Boris lived in a small wooden house in Uritsk,
a suburb half an hour away by train.



Oh goodness!
Boys, come in,
come in!



Maria Ivanovna always offered
us little pies.



His father was a factory worker.

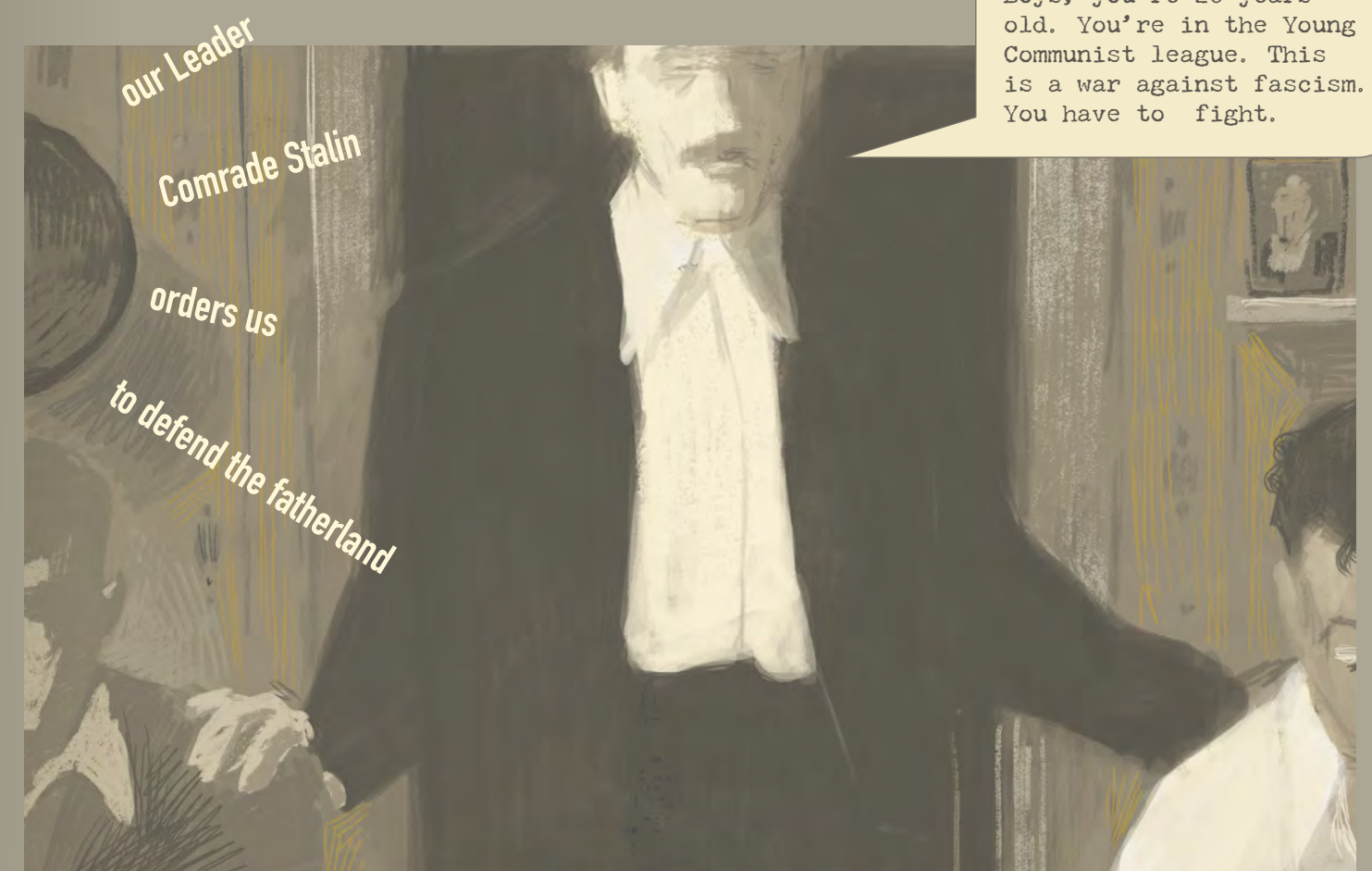
I will turn
on the radio.



The pies had a meat-and-mushroom filling.



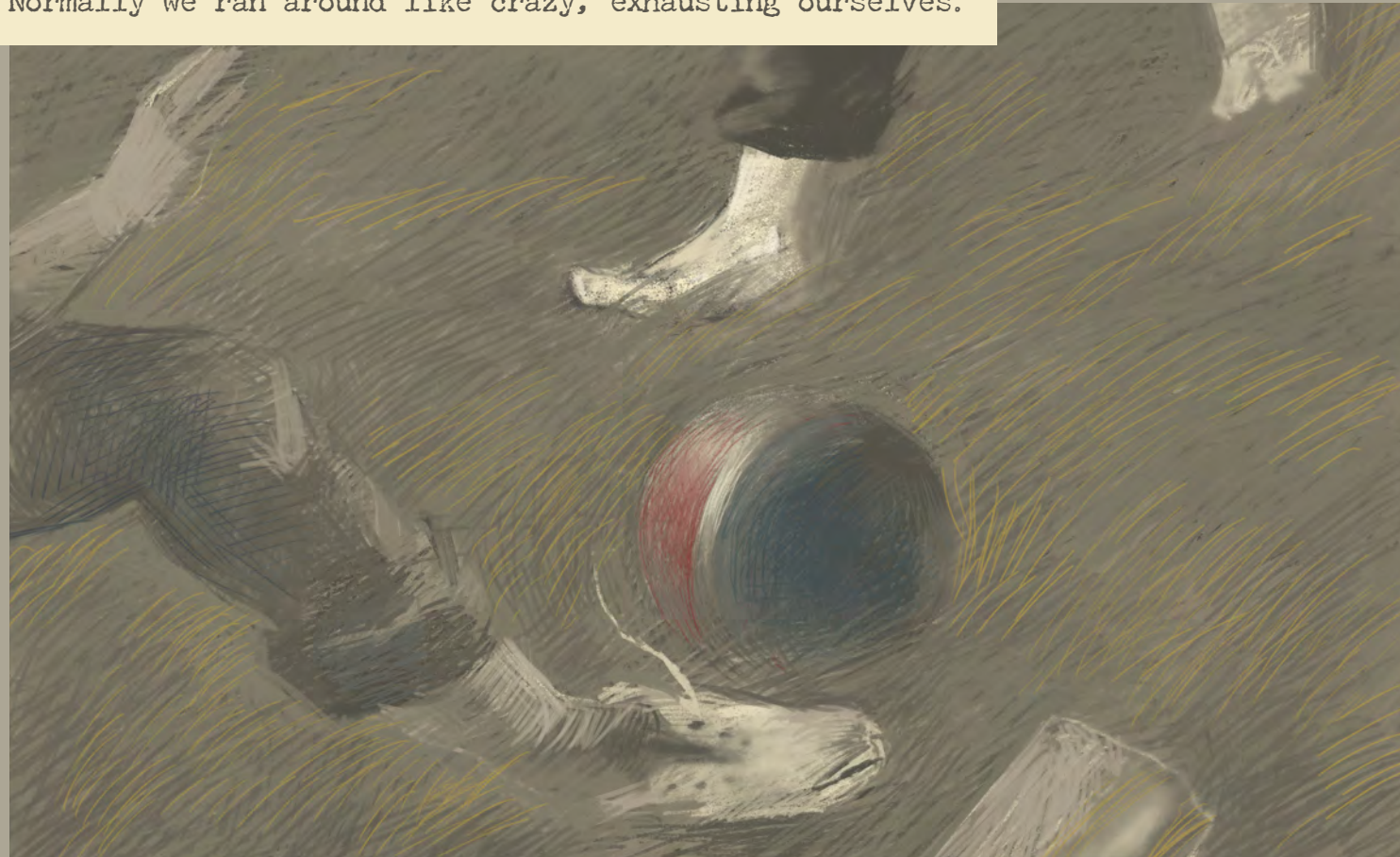
The tea was strong
and sweet.



Boys, you're 20 years
old. You're in the Young
Communist league. This
is a war against fascism.
You have to fight.

our Leader
Comrade Stalin
orders us
to defend the fatherland

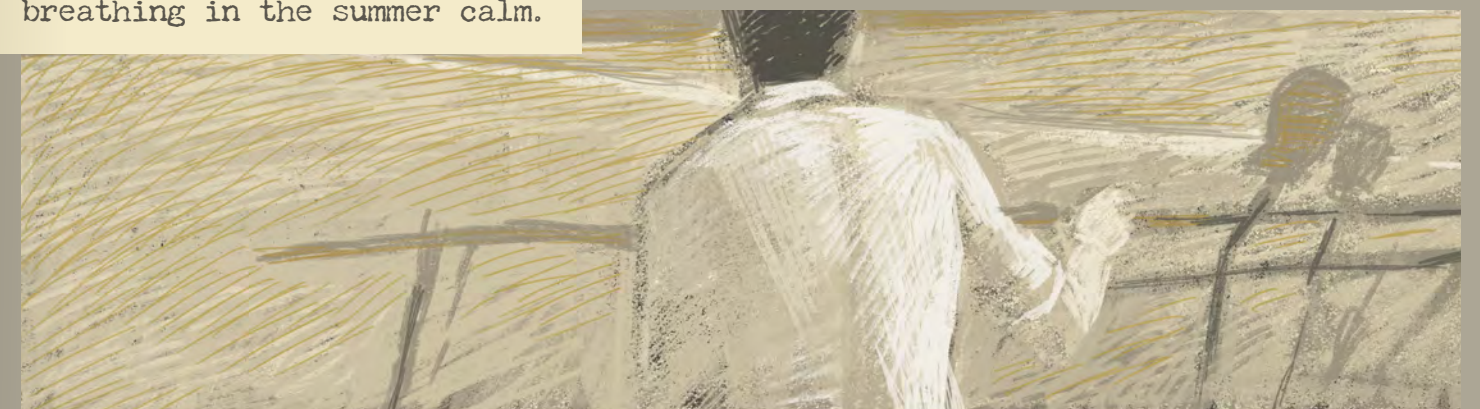
Normally we ran around like crazy, exhausting ourselves.



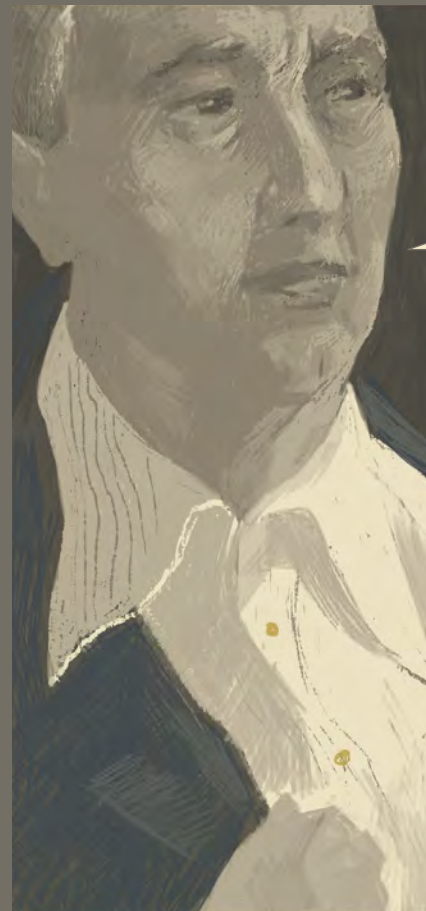
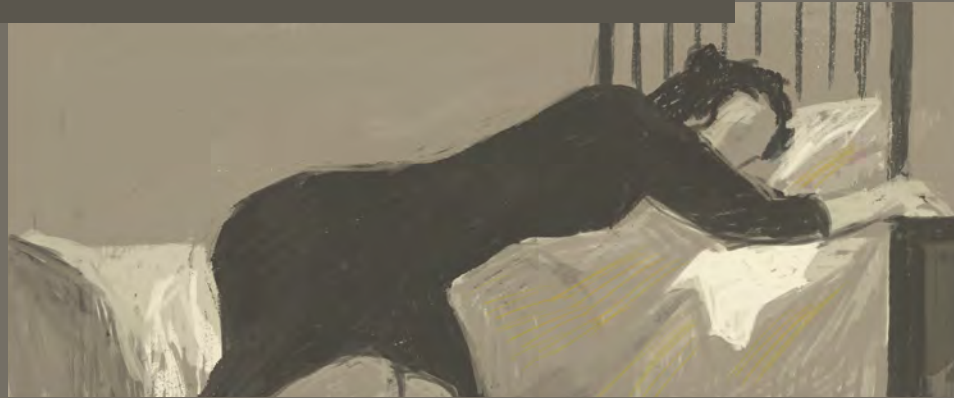
That day we barely kicked the ball.



We just stood by the fence
breathing in the summer calm.



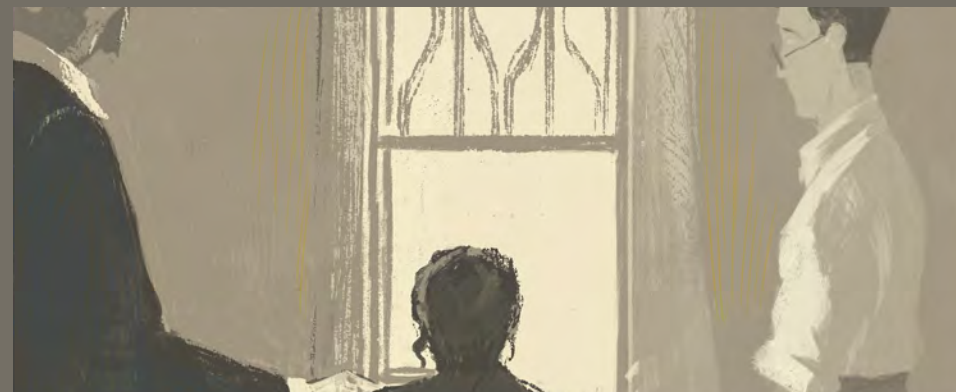
When I came home, Mother was in tears.



I am a surgeon.
I will get called
up again. So will
you.



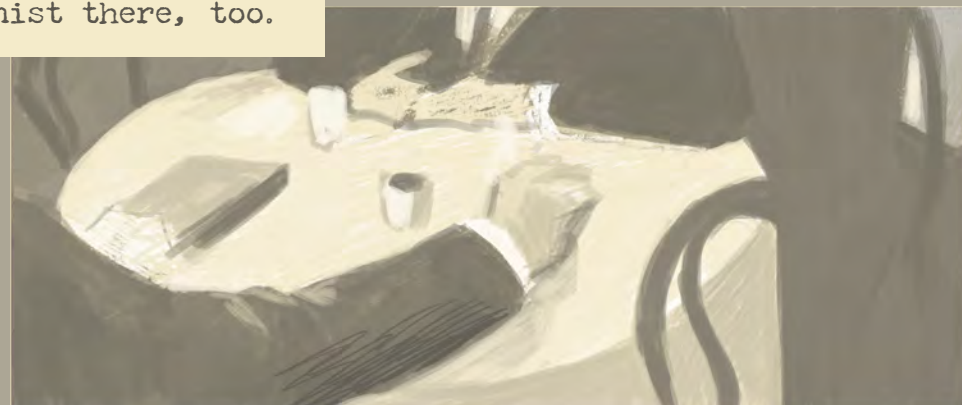
This only made Mother cry more.



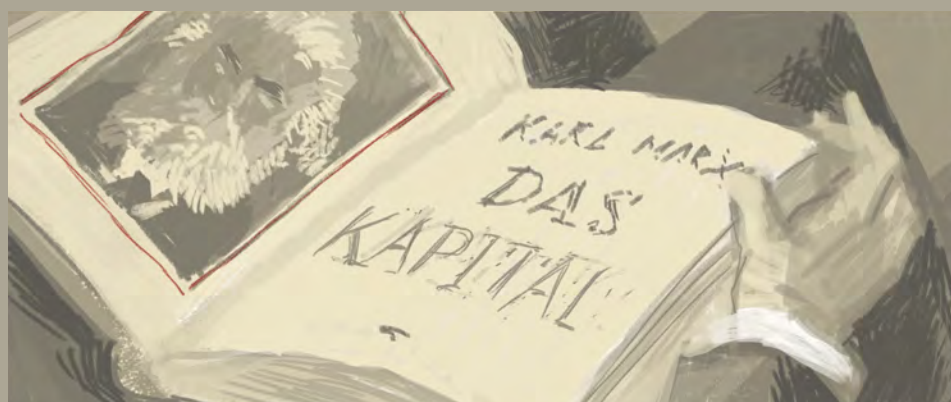
I knew all about the Nazis, but I still
couldn't believe my Father and I would be
fighting Germans. I lived and breathed Germany.
Why would the Germans be trying to kill me?



Father studied medicine in Berlin before the Revolution. He became a Communist there, too.



He came back to Russia enamored of all things German, and he wanted me to learn the language.



My teacher Gabriela Yurievna taught me German from the age of three.



ich bin, du bist,
and your tongue
doesn't go near
your teeth.

We spent whole days together, strolling through the Summer Garden, enjoying ice cream. She was like a favorite aunt or grandmother.



My family lived on Zakharievskaya Street. My parents thought that the city, soon to be renamed Leningrad, would be safer for Jews than Ukraine, where they were from. Ukraine was ravaged by fighting and pogroms.



My father brought a friend to live with us, Sergey Tiulpanov. They met while serving in the Red Army during the Civil War.



When I was little he was like an older brother to me.



Tiulpanov wasn't in medicine like Father, his job was to make sure that people thought correctly.



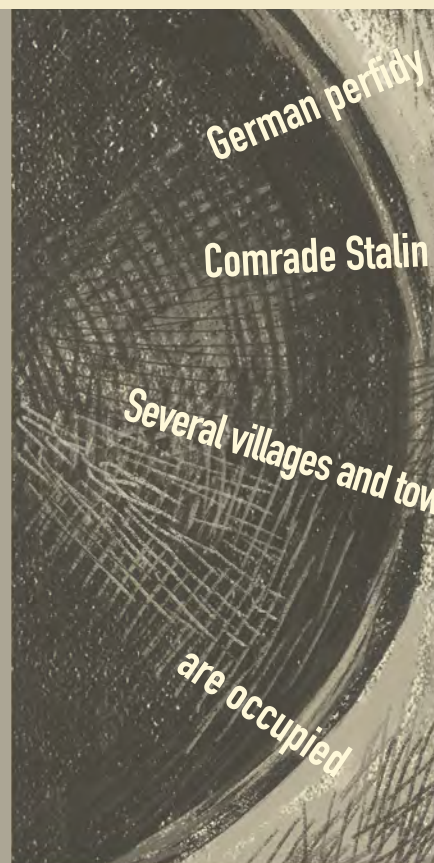
He eventually became a political economist. He convinced me to choose that as my major at the university.



Now that he held an important position,
the party gave him his own apartment.



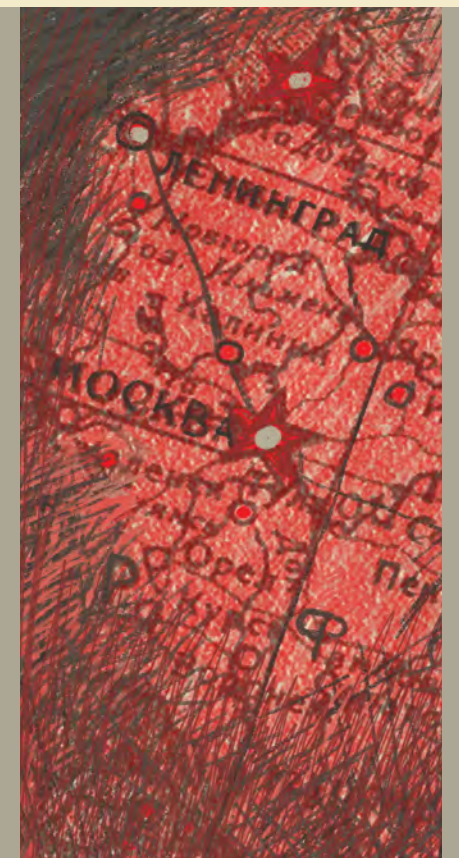
He and his wife lived crosstown. My parents
and I headed there that same Sunday afternoon.



The radio announcers said that German tanks were rolling towards us.



We traced the boundary between the Soviet Union and Germany.



CHAPTER 2
Enlisting

The next day our department gathered in the lecture hall. Professor Voznesensky spoke.



We must defend our homeland. Boys, write a statement that you are volunteering.



Death
to
German
fascism!

Everyone swore to enlist, except one person.



The recruiting center was mobbed.



Home right now!
Everyone here is going
to fight the Germans
bare-handed. Let things
settle. You'll be
drafted soon enough.

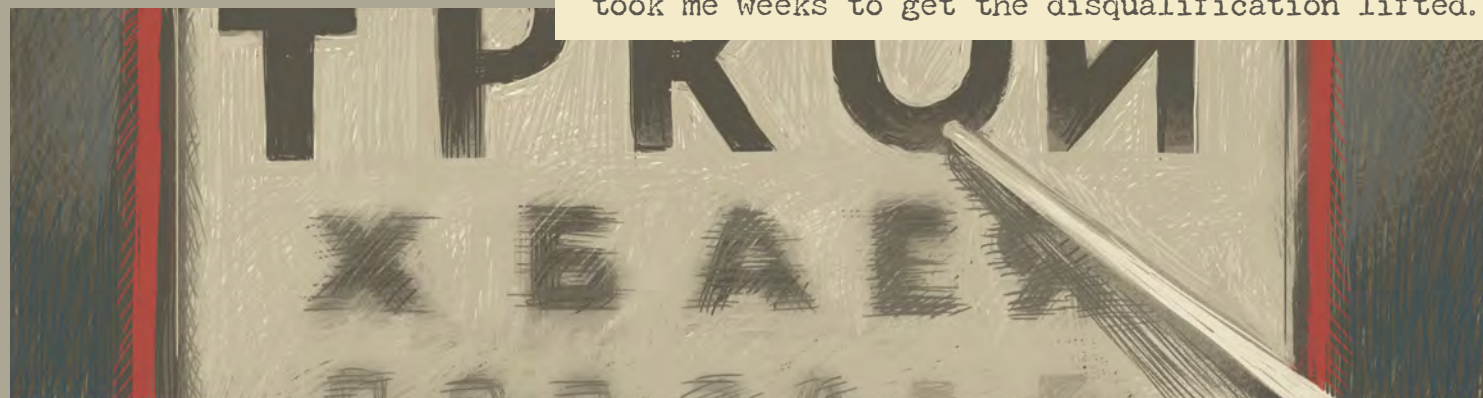


On the way to another center,
we ran into Tiulpanov.

We walked home as our classmates reported for duty.



In any case, I was so nearsighted that my
registration card said "unfit to serve." It
took me weeks to get the disqualification lifted.



The German Army
steamrolled through Latvia, Lithuania
and Estonia, which the Soviets
had annexed in 1940.

The first students to enlist were massacred on the Estonian border. Others, like me, had military training instead of classes.



So now I fire?

Yes. Pretend you
have bullets.



Since there was no ammunition,
we practiced the bayonet.

In July Grishka and I moved to the barracks on Goloday Island.



Mama packed for me even though I told her not to.



We were put together with shipbuilding workers to dig trenches in the event of an attack from the sea.



Missin' the library, Four Eyes?

Digging trenches for twelve hours a day almost killed me.

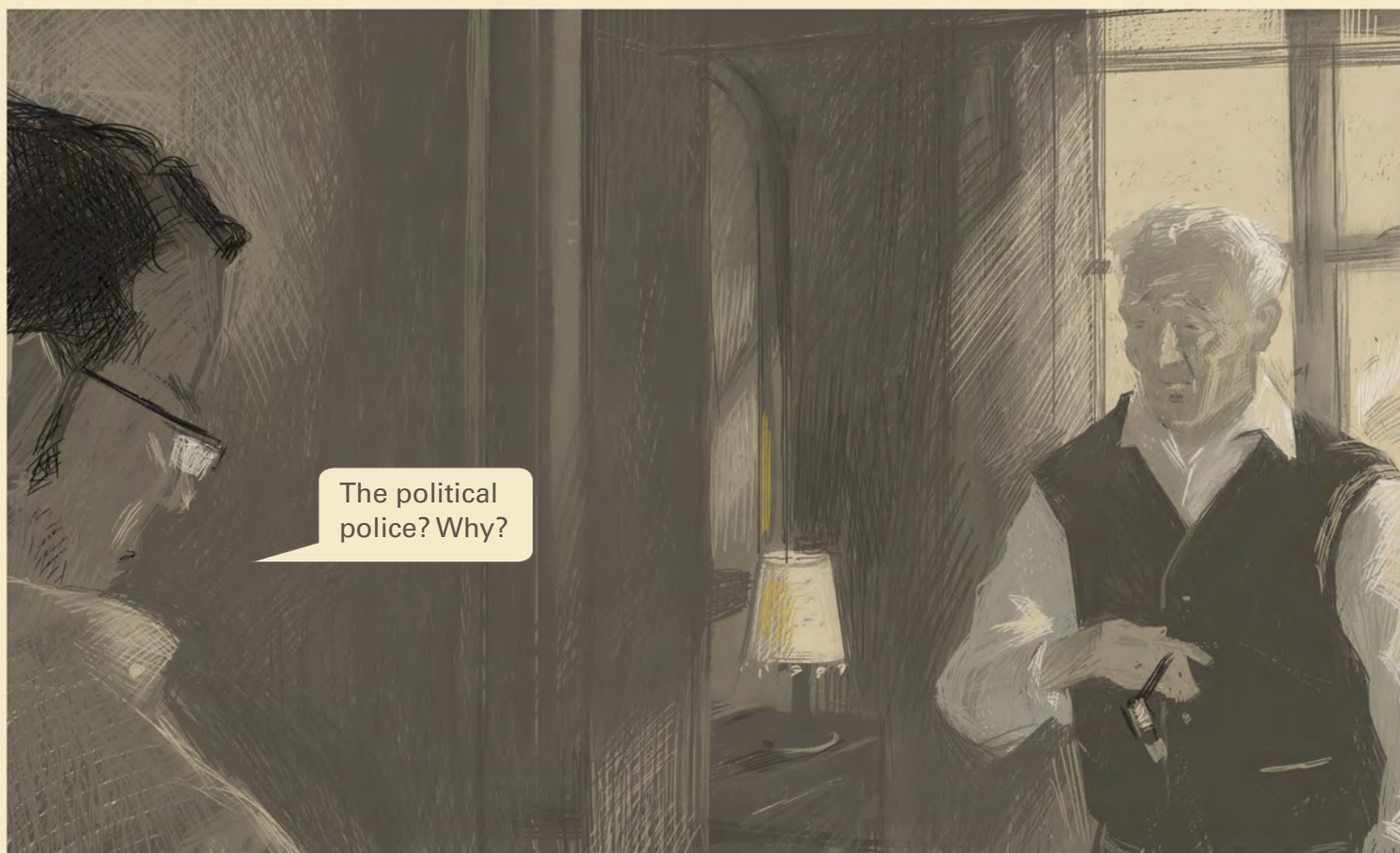
Our understanding of Das Kapital is improving substantially.



That's a good one!



Then they formed a battalion out of us, the 209th Fighter Battalion of the Leningrad NKVD.



The political police? Why?

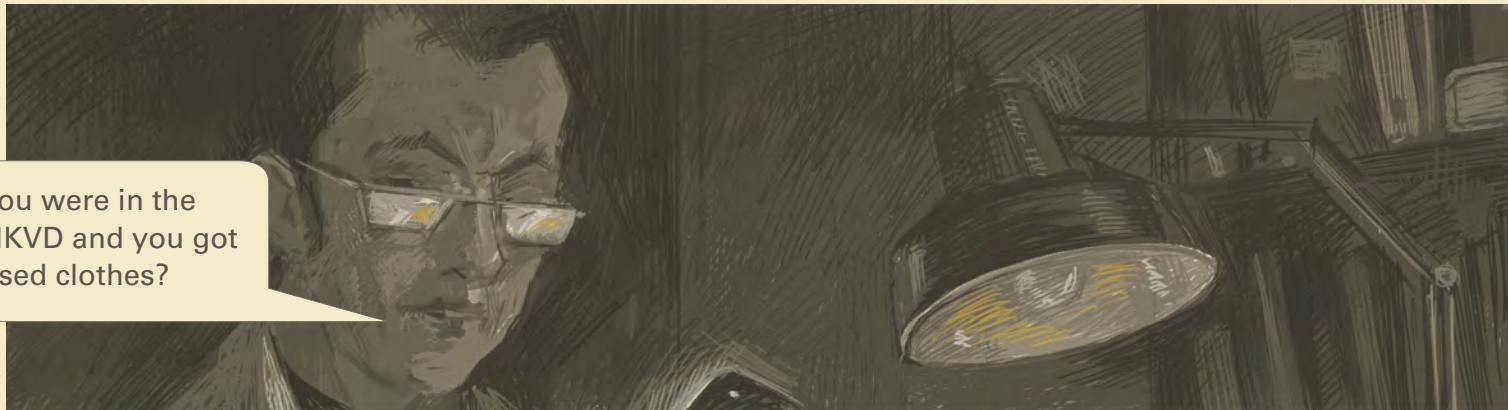





We finally got uniforms. But they were old.




Instead of socks, there were strips of fabric you wrapped around your foot before inserting it into a boot.

A man with glasses is shown in a dark, industrial-looking environment. A large lamp is visible in the background, casting a light on the scene. The man is looking slightly to the side.


You were in the NKVD and you got used clothes?

An older man with glasses is shown in a dark, industrial-looking environment. He is wearing a dark vest over a light-colored shirt. The background is dark and textured.

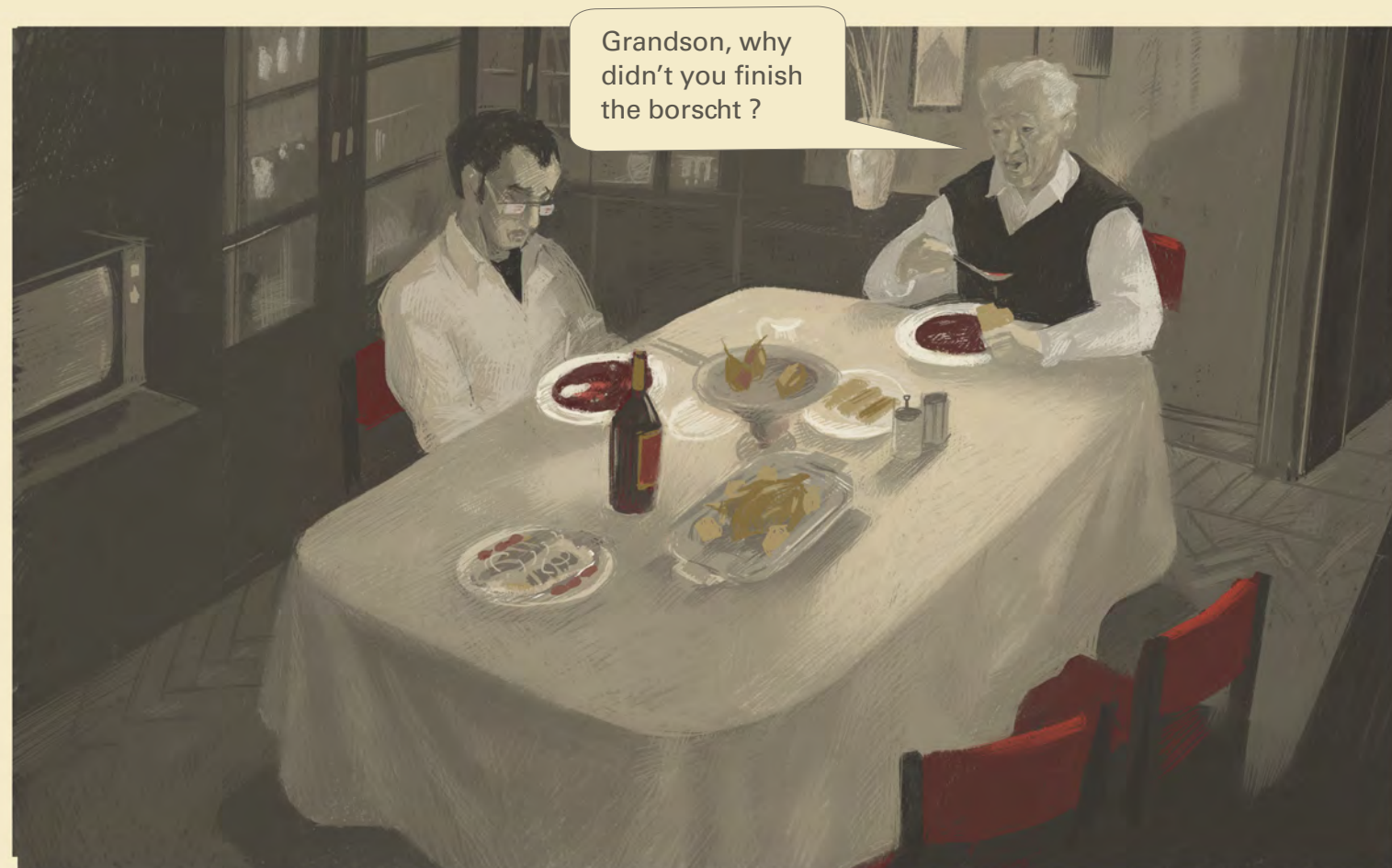
We were peons.

A man in a uniform is serving food from a large pot into bowls on a table. Other people are seated at the table, and the scene is dimly lit.

But we were fed. There were even times I didn't finish my meal.

A man in a uniform is sitting at a table, eating from a bowl. He is wearing glasses and a dark uniform. There are other people in the background, and the scene is dimly lit.

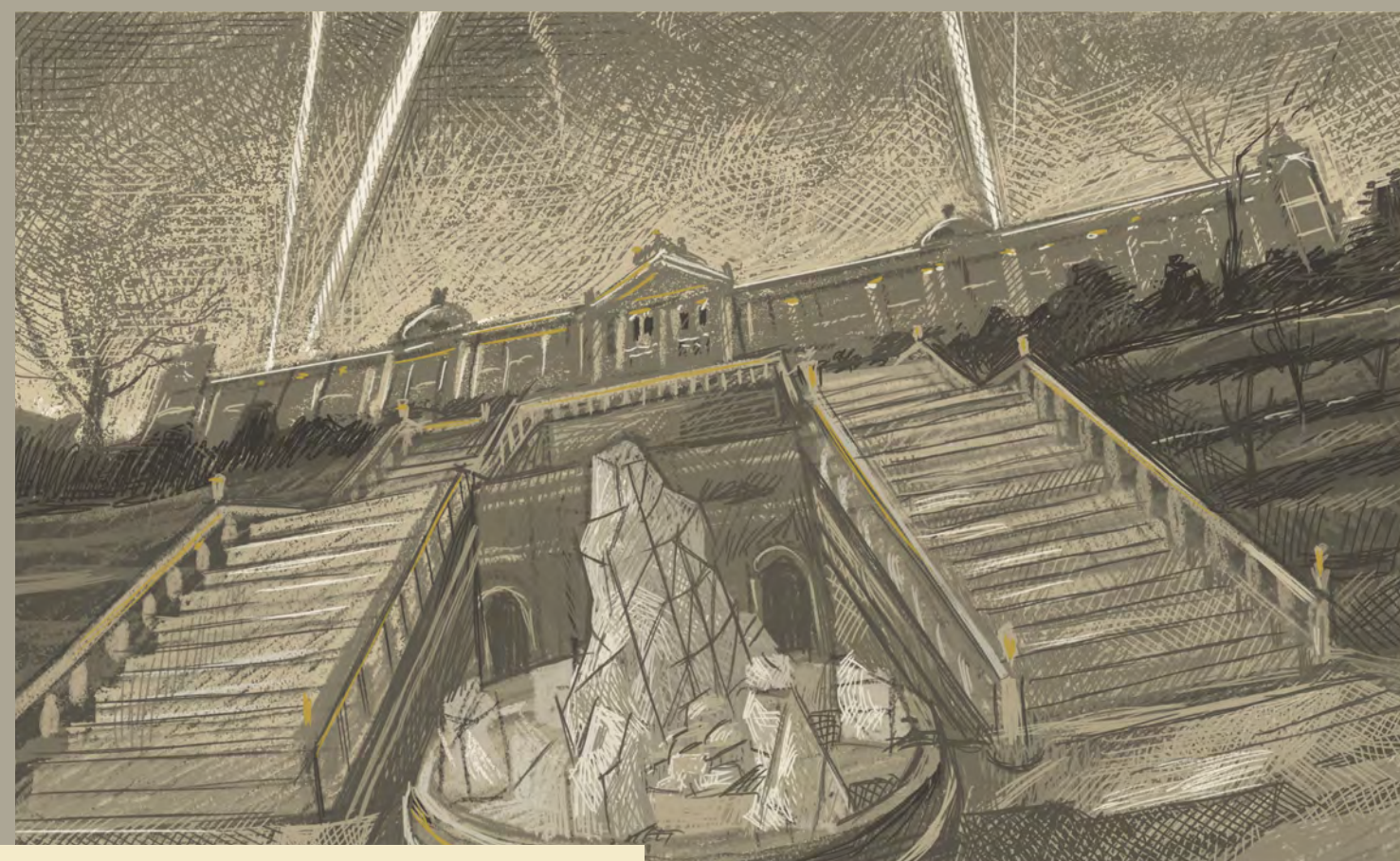
We got soup, a bowl of kasha, sausages. It was July.



CHAPTER 3
Germans at the Gate



On August 1 we came to Peterhof, 30 km west of the city.



Peterhof has an eighteenth-century palace famous for its fountains. The fountains were dead.

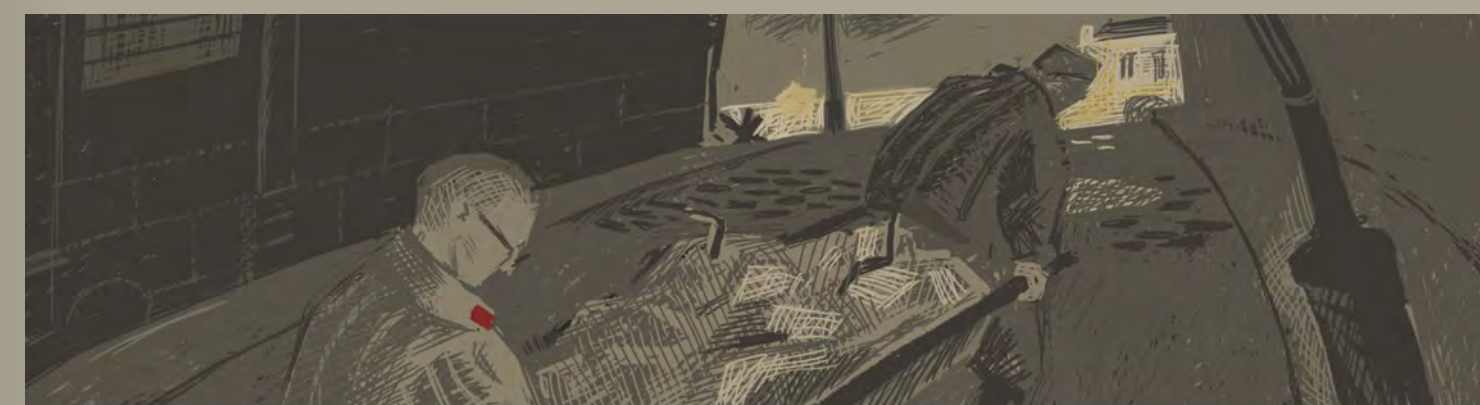


We set about fortifying an officer school.

Townpeople were conscripted to help us.

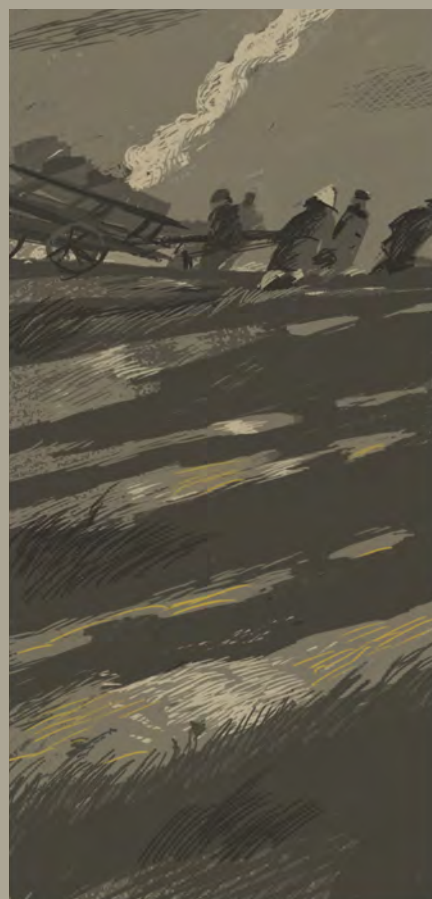


We expected the Germans to attack from the forest.





For two weeks, civilian refugees and fleeing Red Army soldiers filed past us.



German planes flew overhead to bomb the naval fort in Kronstadt.



We had no artillery but I was issued 4 grenades and a rifle with 24 rounds.



The Germans arrived on the morning of the 18th.



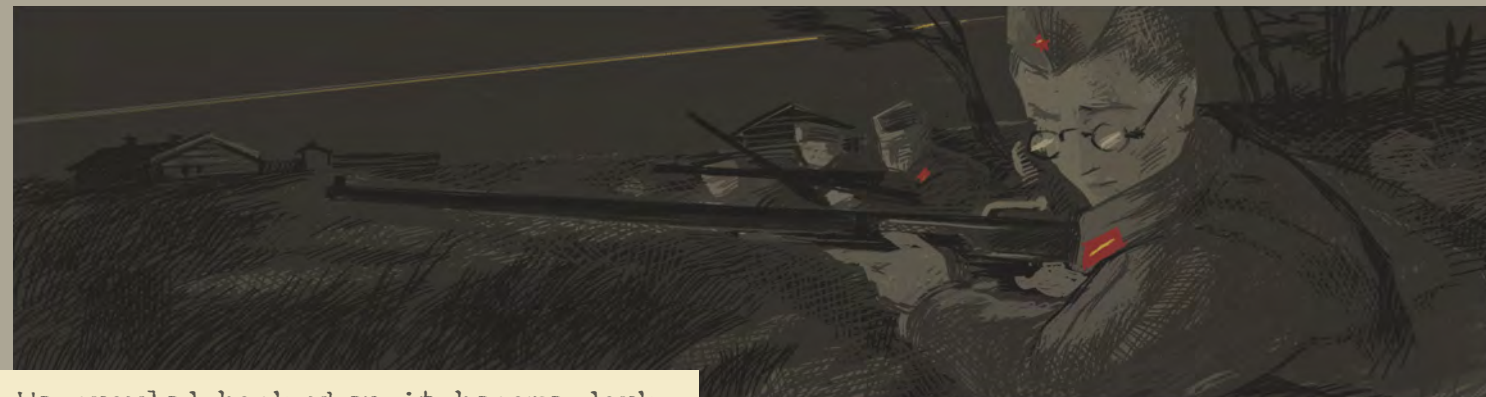
They hit us with small arms and mortar fire. My friend was killed, a student at the history department.



The next day the officer school was bombed. It collapsed on the families it was sheltering.



We tried to attack. We ran under fire for a hundred yards and then pressed ourselves into the ground.



We crawled back when it became dark.

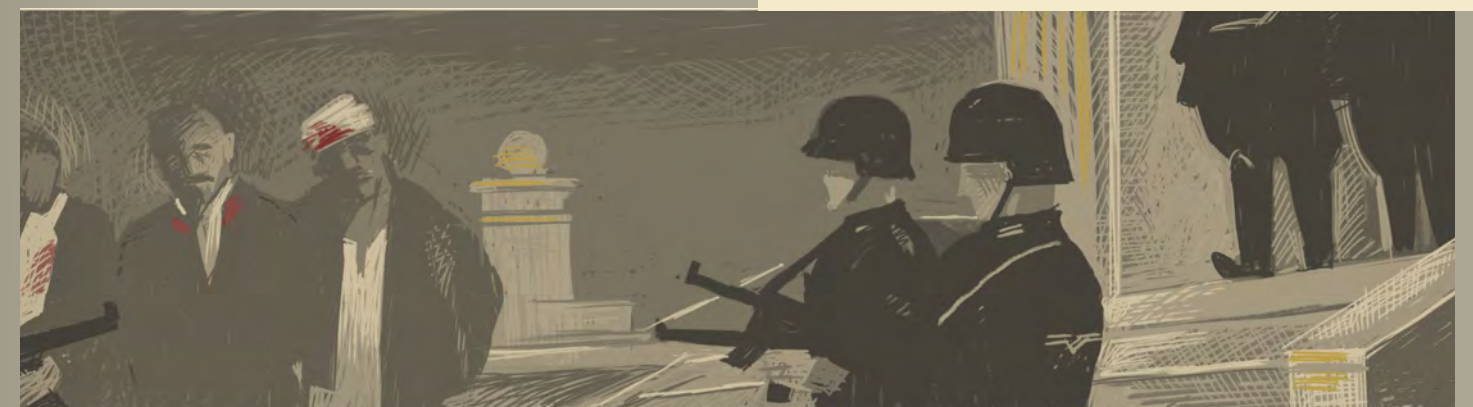


On the 20th we got the signal to retreat.

The Germans almost cut us off twice.



It was a slog that went on for days. We lost a lot of men. Some were shot, others, taken prisoner.



As we passed a psychiatric hospital on the edge of the city I saw jelly fish in the sky.



The Germans,
the Germans!



I learned later that these were the paratroopers
who had captured the island of Crete that May.



We were shooting at each other from up close, taking cover inside smashed-up tramcars.



Then, reinforcements came-
-the legendary Kronstadt sailors!



A German rose in front of me and then fell.



I'd never seen a German soldier so close before, much less a dying one.



The psychiatric hospital started to burn. The patients poured out...



...and ran into the crossfire in their blue standard-issue pajamas.





The sailors killed all the Germans and laid them out by the roadside.



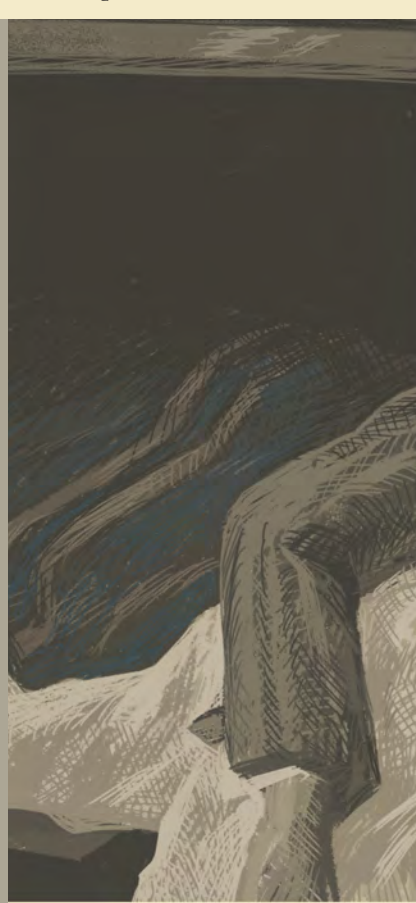
Grishka also was killed. I didn't see him die. He had only two months to live after I found him in the library and told him the war began.

WE FOUGHT UNTIL
THE GERMAN ADVANCE
WAS STOPPED.
THE ENEMY DUG IN.
LENINGRAD WAS SURROUNDED.
THE BLOCKADE BEGAN.



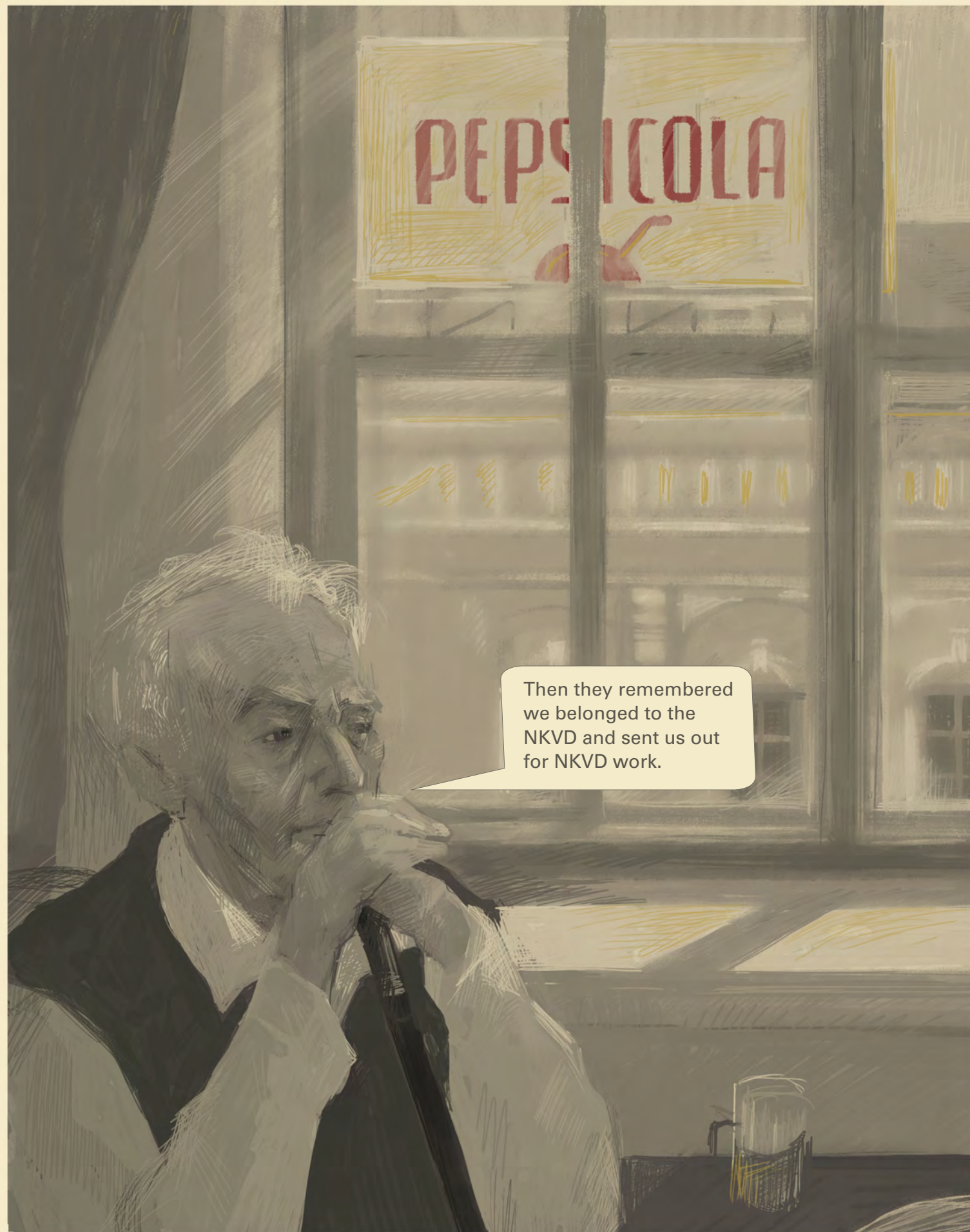
CHAPTER 4
Internal Enemies

When we got back to Goloday
I slept for 24 hours straight.



We still had a lot of food.







We would go on patrol.



We hunted for “rocketmen,” people who signaled to German bombers.



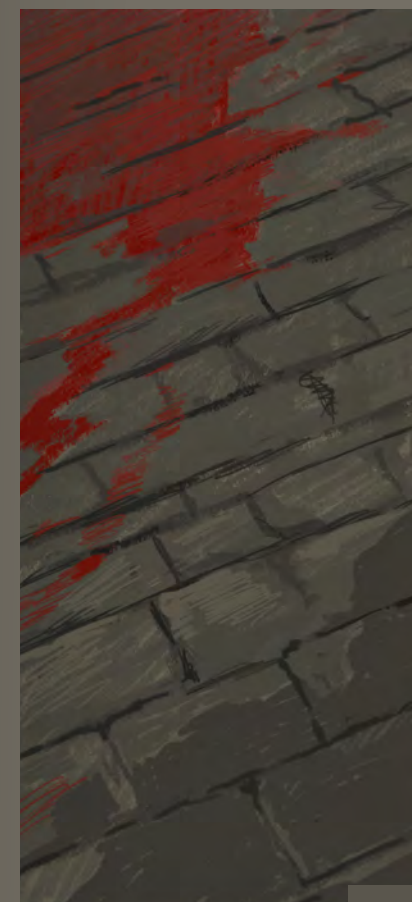
The city was under blackout orders. If a window was lit up, we shot at it.



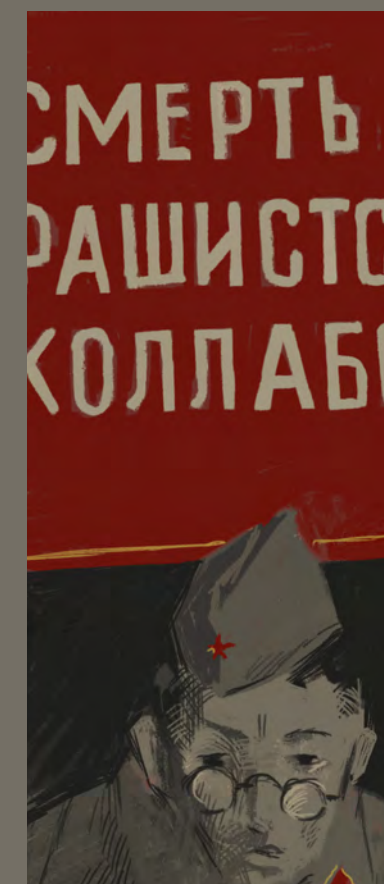
These arrested were taken to Goloday...

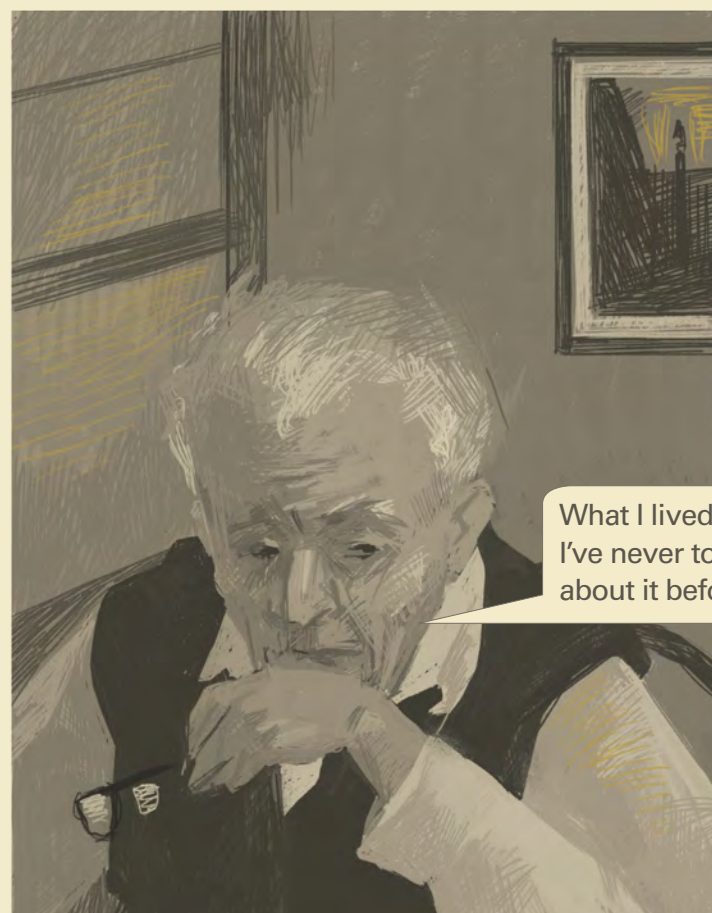


...where they were court-martialed and executed.

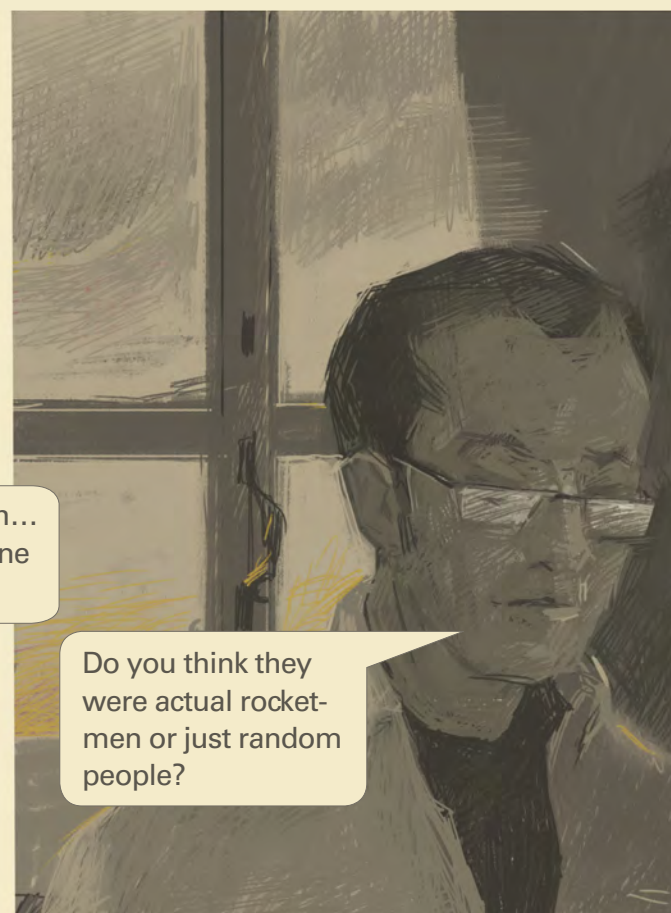


The firing squad was made up of six men. We all took turns.





What I lived through...
I've never told anyone
about it before.



Do you think they
were actual rocket-
men or just random
people?

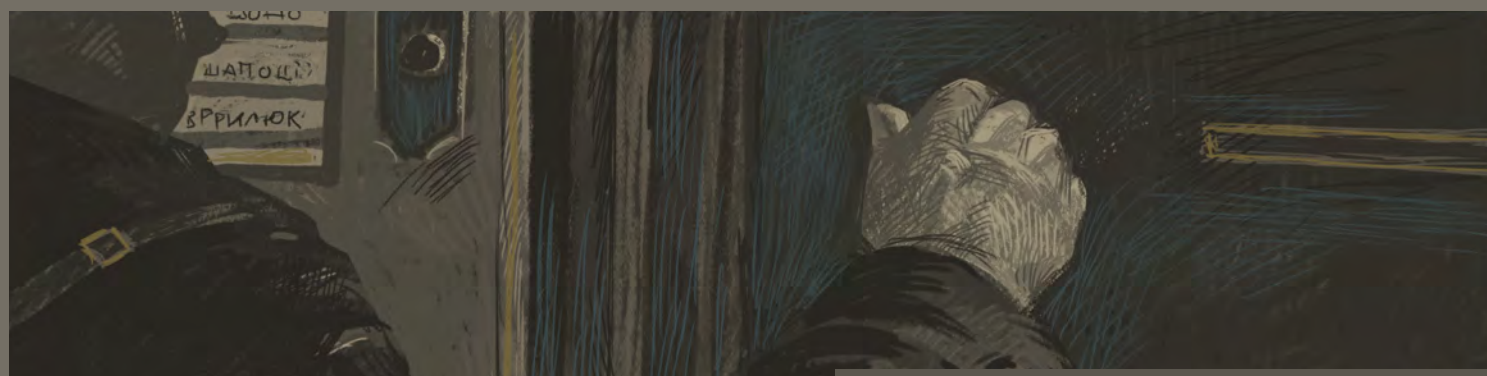


What other groups
was the NKVD after?

I don't know, grand-
son. We were told they
were rocketmen.



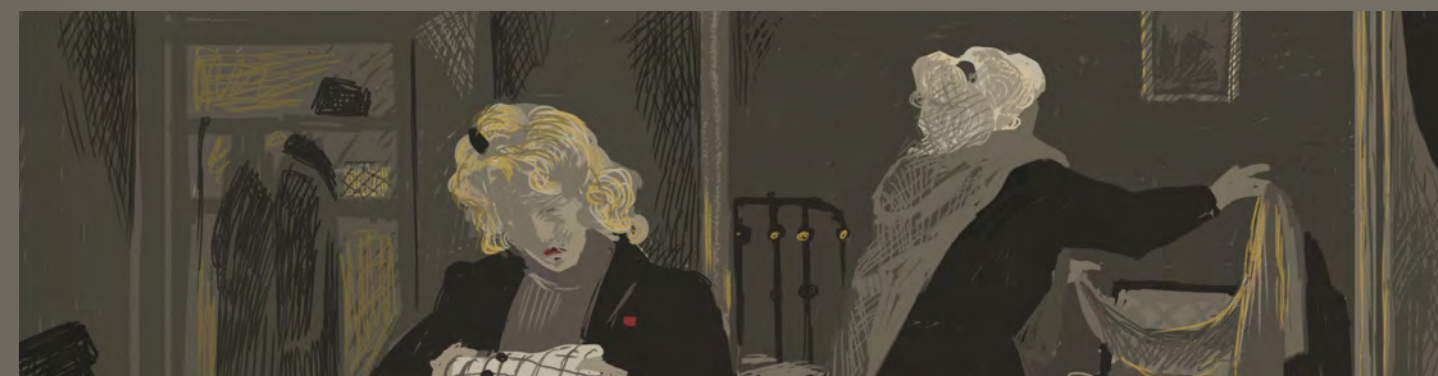
One day we pulled up in front
of a building I knew very well...



...and knocked on a familiar door.



Gabrielle Yurievna Hermann was
there with her family.





She made me love German culture, she made me read the poems of Heinrich Heine.



Vitya, if the city falls, don't be afraid. The Germans are a cultured people.

She was referring to my being Jewish. We had heard stories of the German persecution of Jews but many of us did not believe them.

I've watched families not know what to pack and run around agitatedly in these situations.



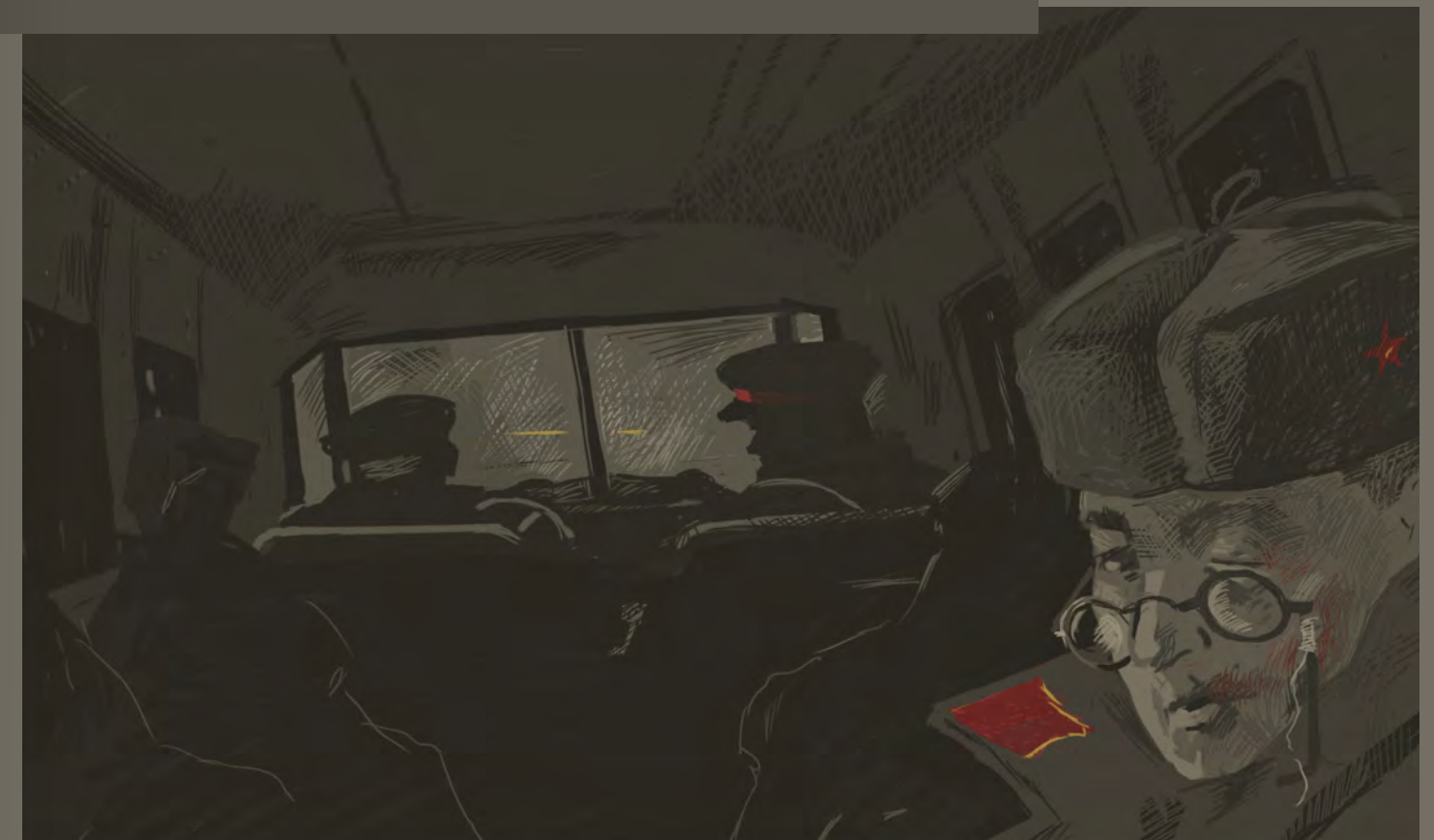
My commanding officer, Lieutenant Pasechnik, slapped me.



We drove Gabrielle Yurievna and her family to the north of the city, to a camp intended for ethnic Germans.

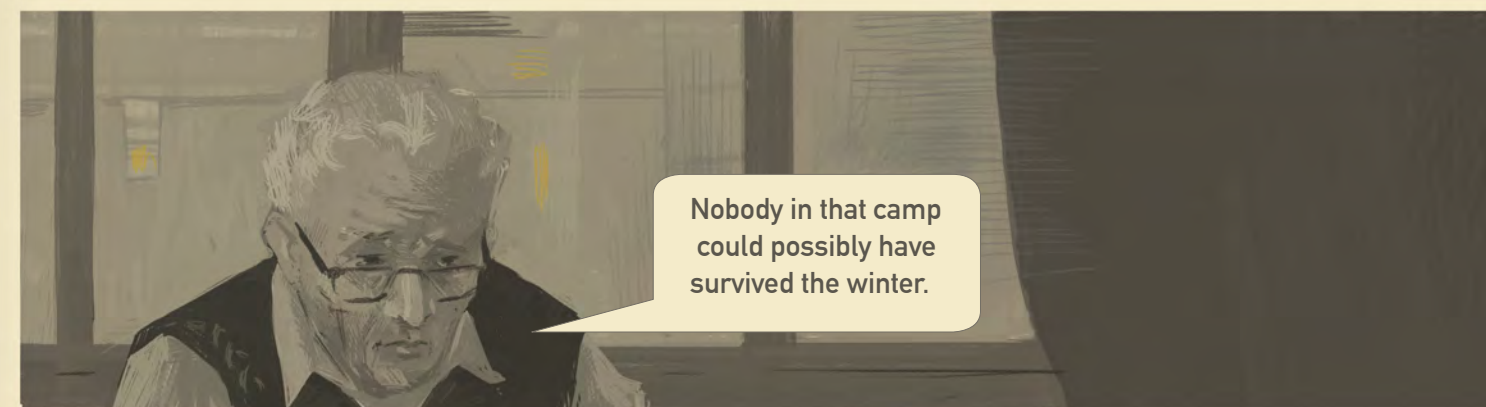


I wanted to help so I grabbed a mattress.





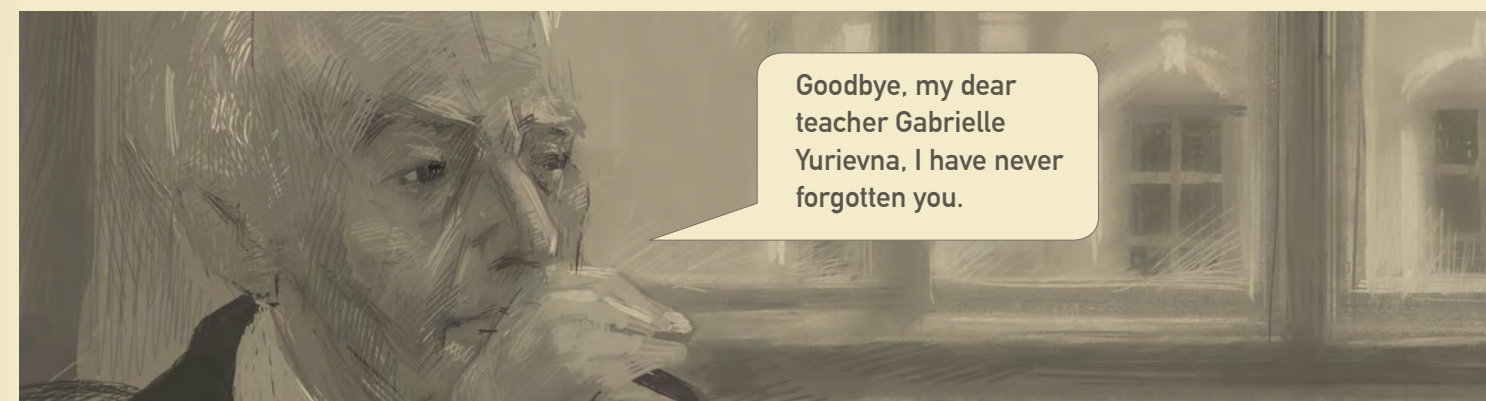
A small forest had been fenced off with barbed wire. The families were given shovels and told to dig their own housing.



Nobody in that camp could possibly have survived the winter.



The Nazis had gas chambers for Jews. The Communists let their own ethnic Germans die of starvation and exposure.



Goodbye, my dear teacher Gabrielle Yurievna, I have never forgotten you.

Pasechnik was still furious
about the mattress.



I'm reporting
you, Torkanovsky!

I could have been transferred to
a penalty battalion, or even executed.

Please, comrade lieu-
tenant... A childhood
teacher—it's like
a grandmother.



He had a moment of
weakness... but he
learned his lesson!

At the end of the ride, the officer relented.



CHAPTER 5
Translator

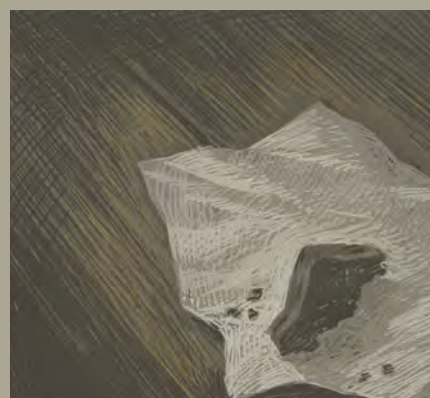
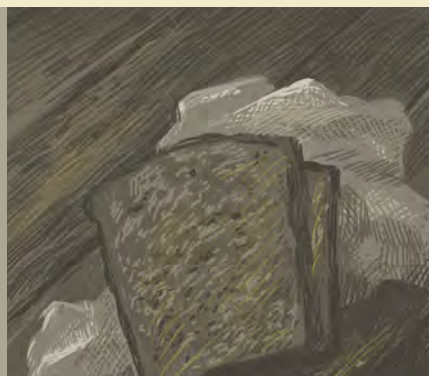
When the first snow fell, we were still on Goloday, close to the sea.



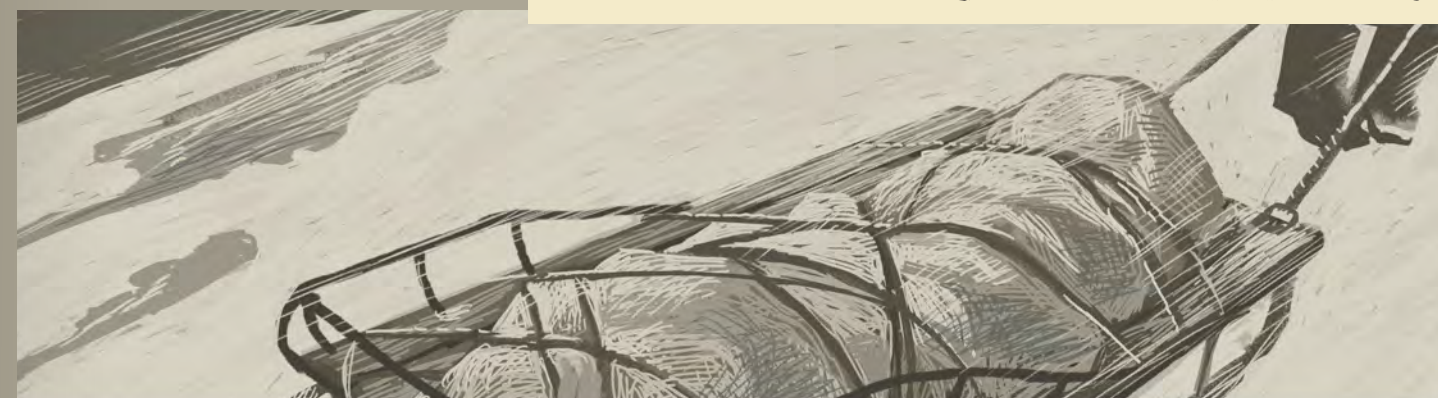
Our food rations got smaller and smaller.



I felt hungry all the time.



We had it better than the civilians. By November the famine was killing hundreds of people a day.



One night in November I had come back from nearly 10 hours on patrol. The streets were frozen over.



Victor, you are coming with me.



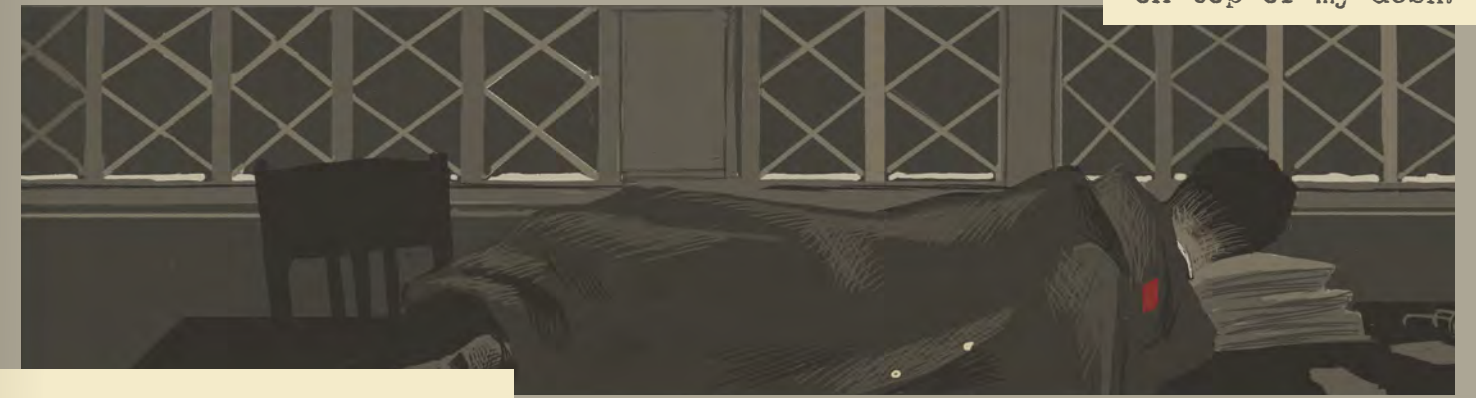
I was woken by Tiulpanov himself. He was now a high-ranking officer of ideology and intelligence.

He brought me to his office at the General Headquarters. The food rations fell again the day after.





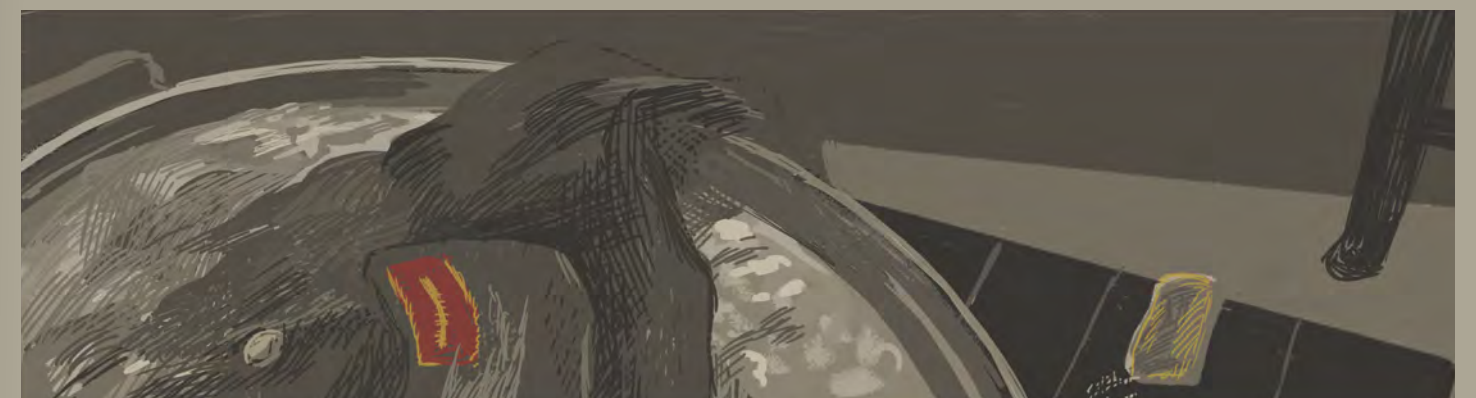
My job was to examine all writing found on killed or captured Germans. Most often, I translated their frontline newspaper, called "Der Sturmer."



We got frontline rations.



I could wash myself and my underclothes.



Some days Tiulpanov attended the main strategy meetings across town at the Smolny. I accompanied him as his bodyguard.



My rifle was too heavy for me in my emaciated state. He carried it when no one could see.



Smolny was far. We couldn't make the journey without stopping.



Part of our route was shelled regularly ... and there was the danger of sabotage.





Tiulpanov's wife, Taisiya Feofilovna, had moved into our apartment with my mother. My father was at the front.

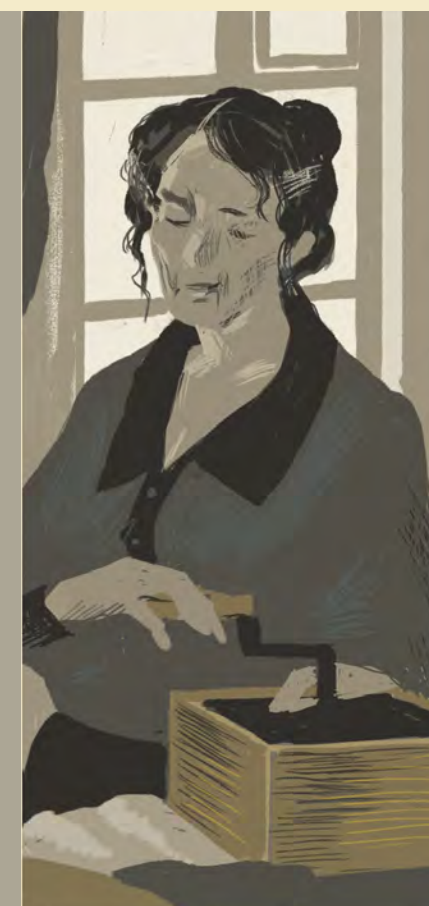


102

In my pockets I brought oats from the horses at the army stables, near the headquarters.



My mother and Taisya ground them with a coffee grinder, and then roasted and boiled them in a pot.



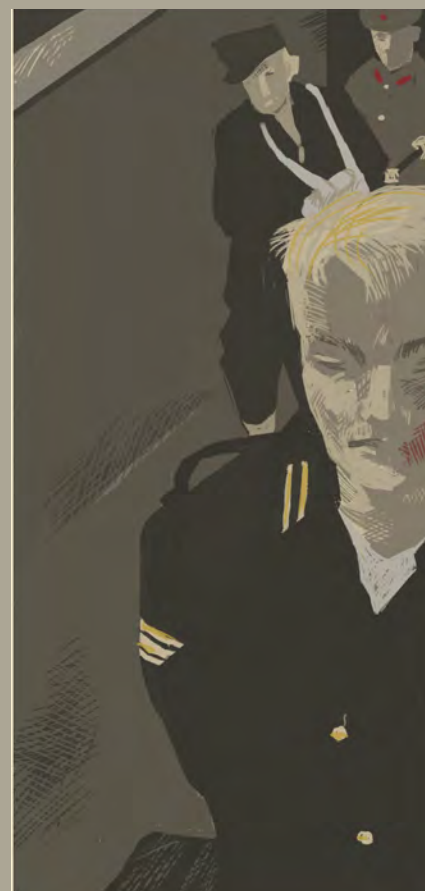
A pinch of salt and even a bay leaf... the meal was delicious.



103

Then we would be on our way.

I also served as an interpreter at interrogations of German POWs.



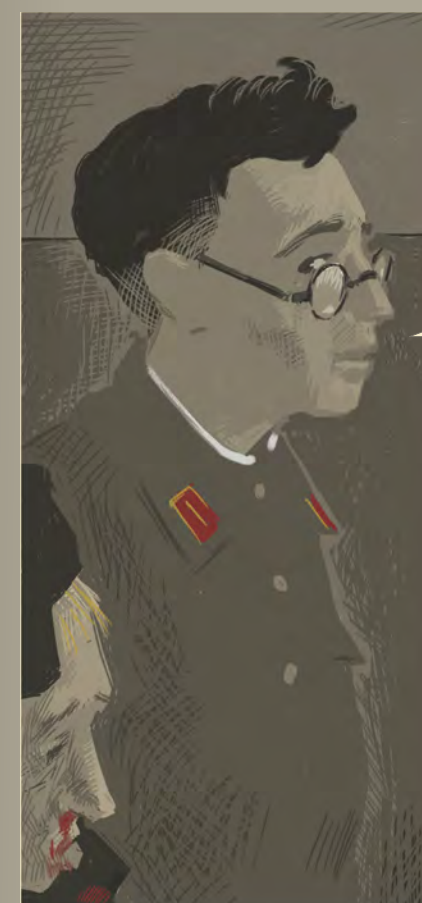
The pilot Lindenmann was shot down over a city park. Tiulpanov had a lower-ranking prisoner brought in for cross-examination.



Tiulpanov reacted to the salute by making the prisoner cry.



darüber <Ich habe nicht darüber nachgedacht.>



He said he wasn't thinking.



See, your soldiers are machines, but they break down quickly.

My assignment at military headquarters ended on New Year's.



I returned to Goloday.

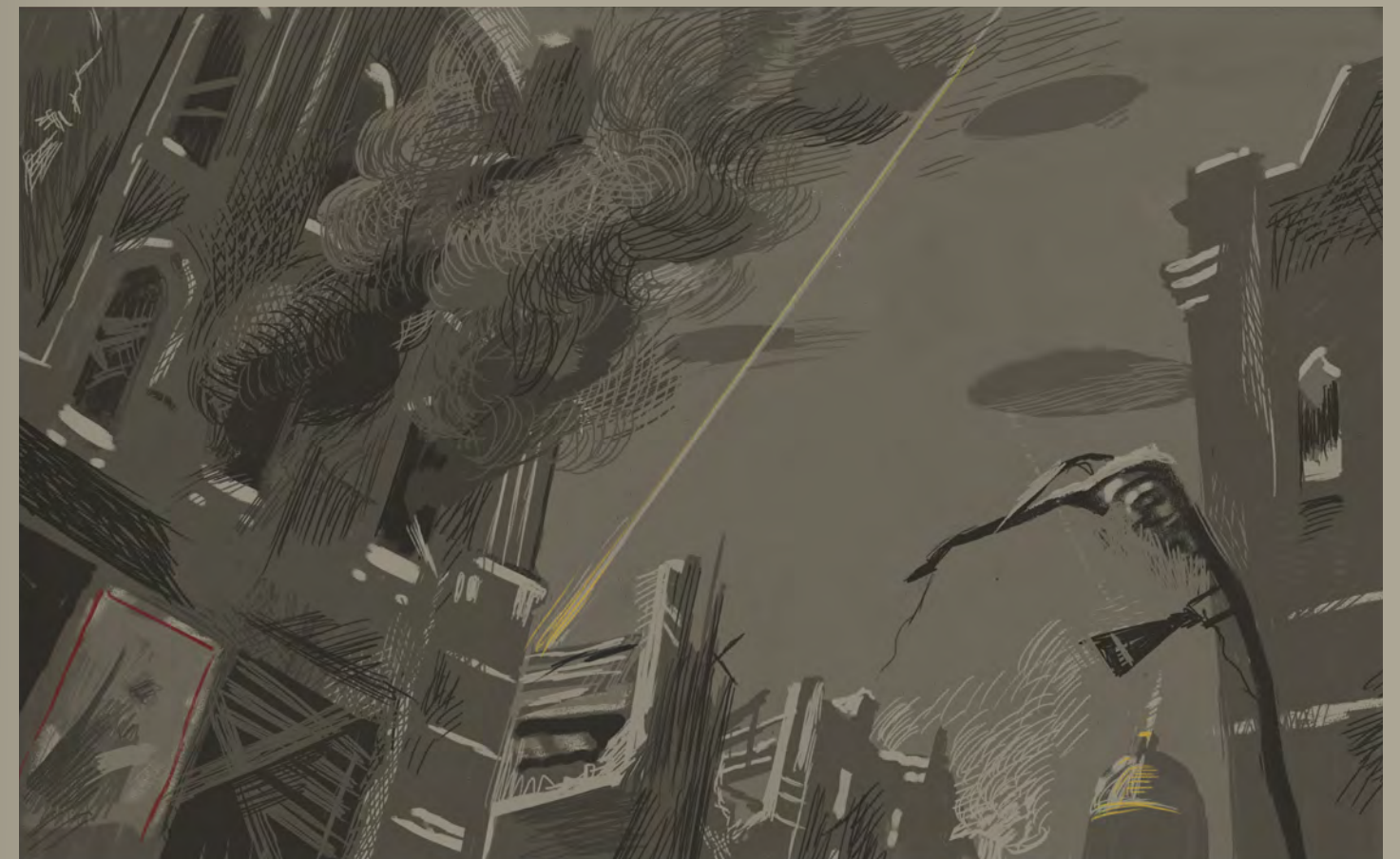


Lieutenant, where are the soldiers?

Some are in the hospital, others are dead, some are on patrol.



The unit was disbanded. University students were told to go home.



CHAPTER 6
Hunger

At home there was no electricity, heating, water or food.



...there was the ice-seized city...



...and the in-between.



...of the dead...

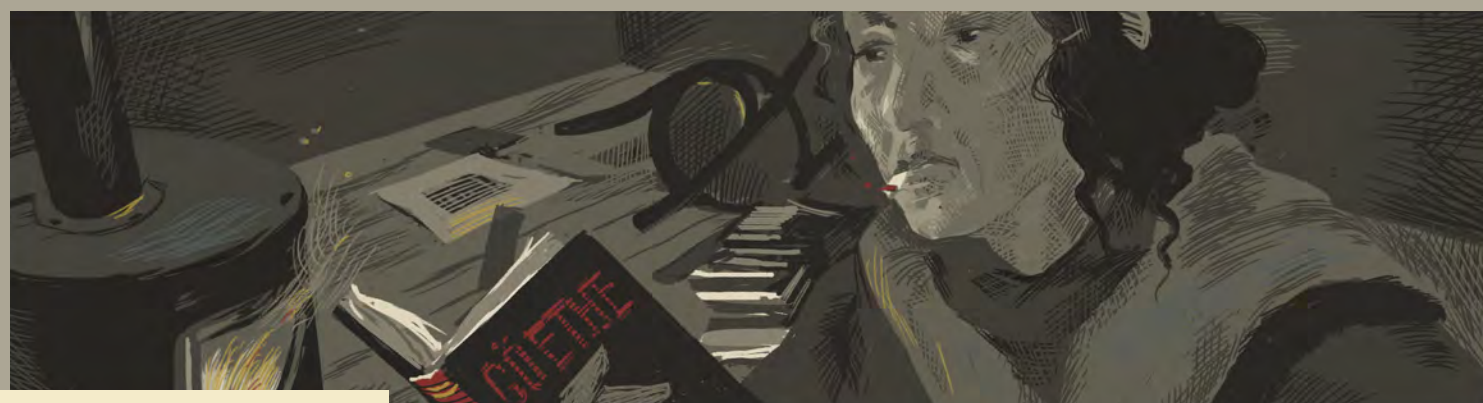


...the living...

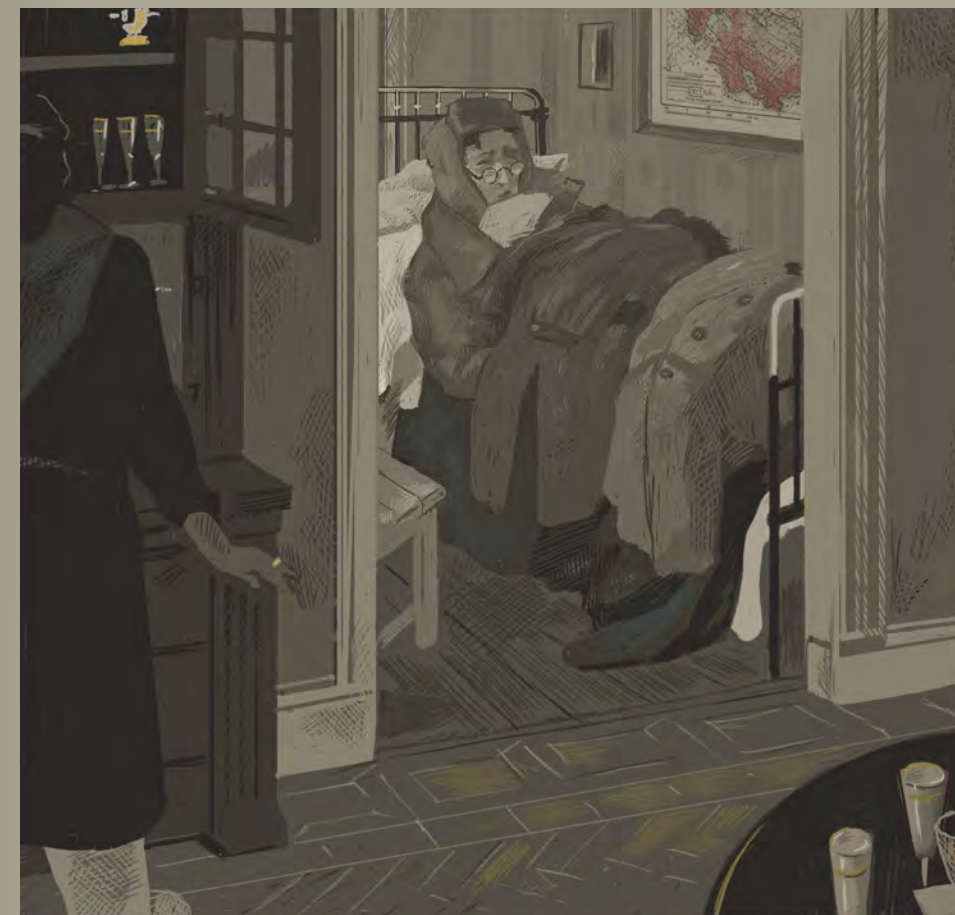




We had a little stove in which we burned furniture...



... and literature.



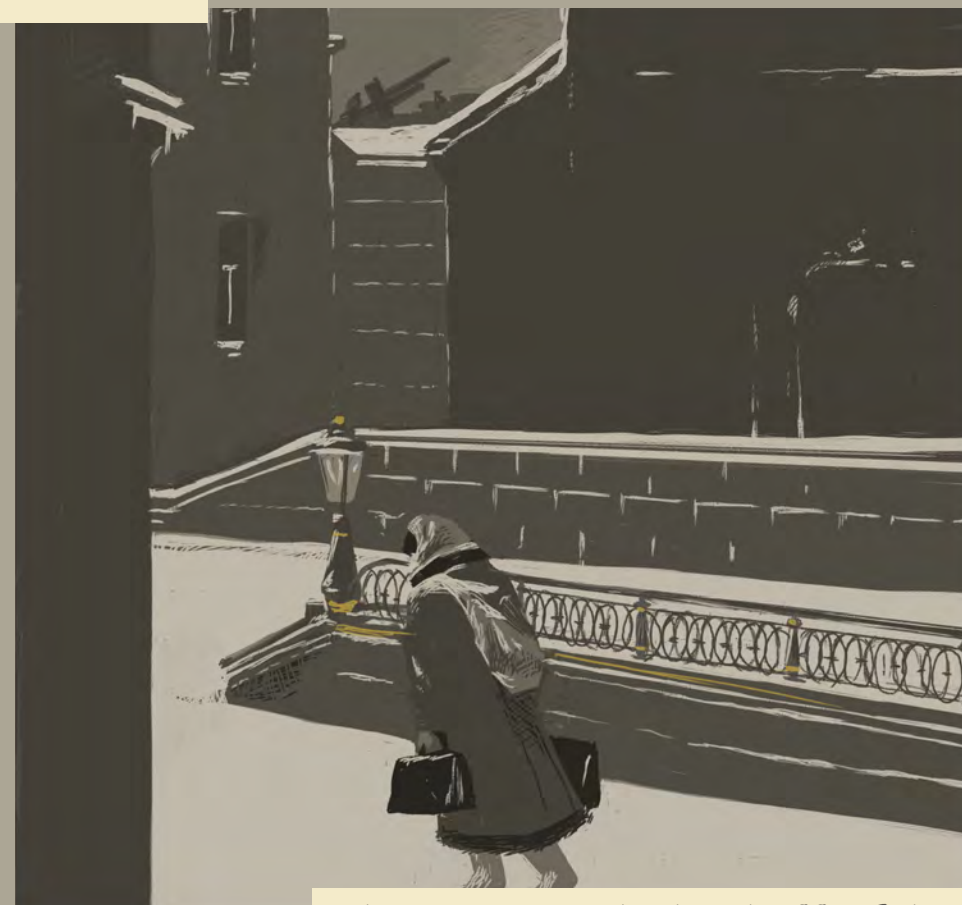
My mother took the family crystal...



...to the black market.



A vast informal economy had sprung up. People were making a killing.

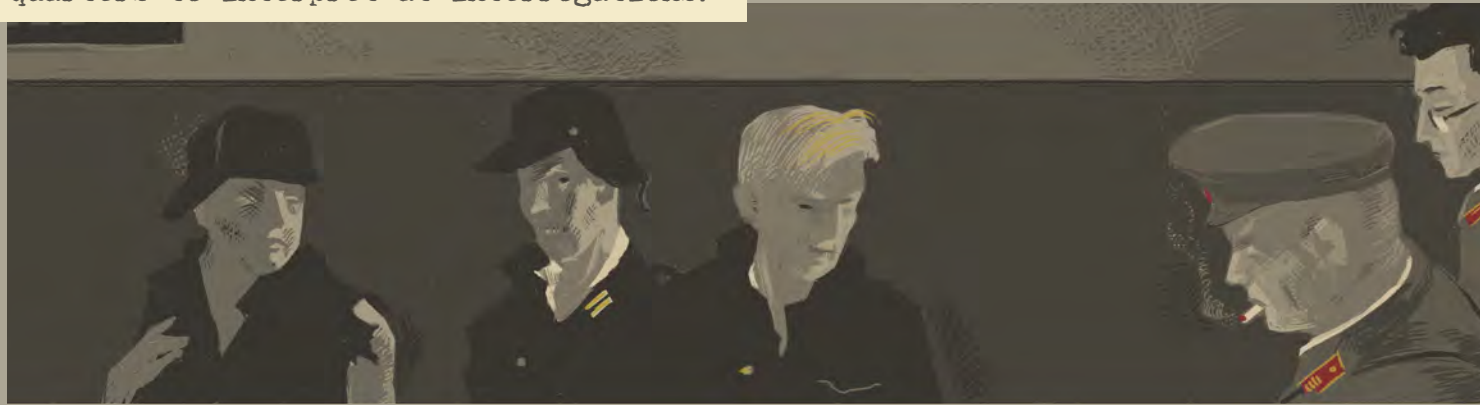


It was rumored that not all of the meat for sale came from animals.

She brought back bread, oats, sugar.



Sometimes I was still summoned to head-
quarters to interpret at interrogations.



They paid me in horse meat.



I watched my step on the way back.
People were robbed and killed for less.*



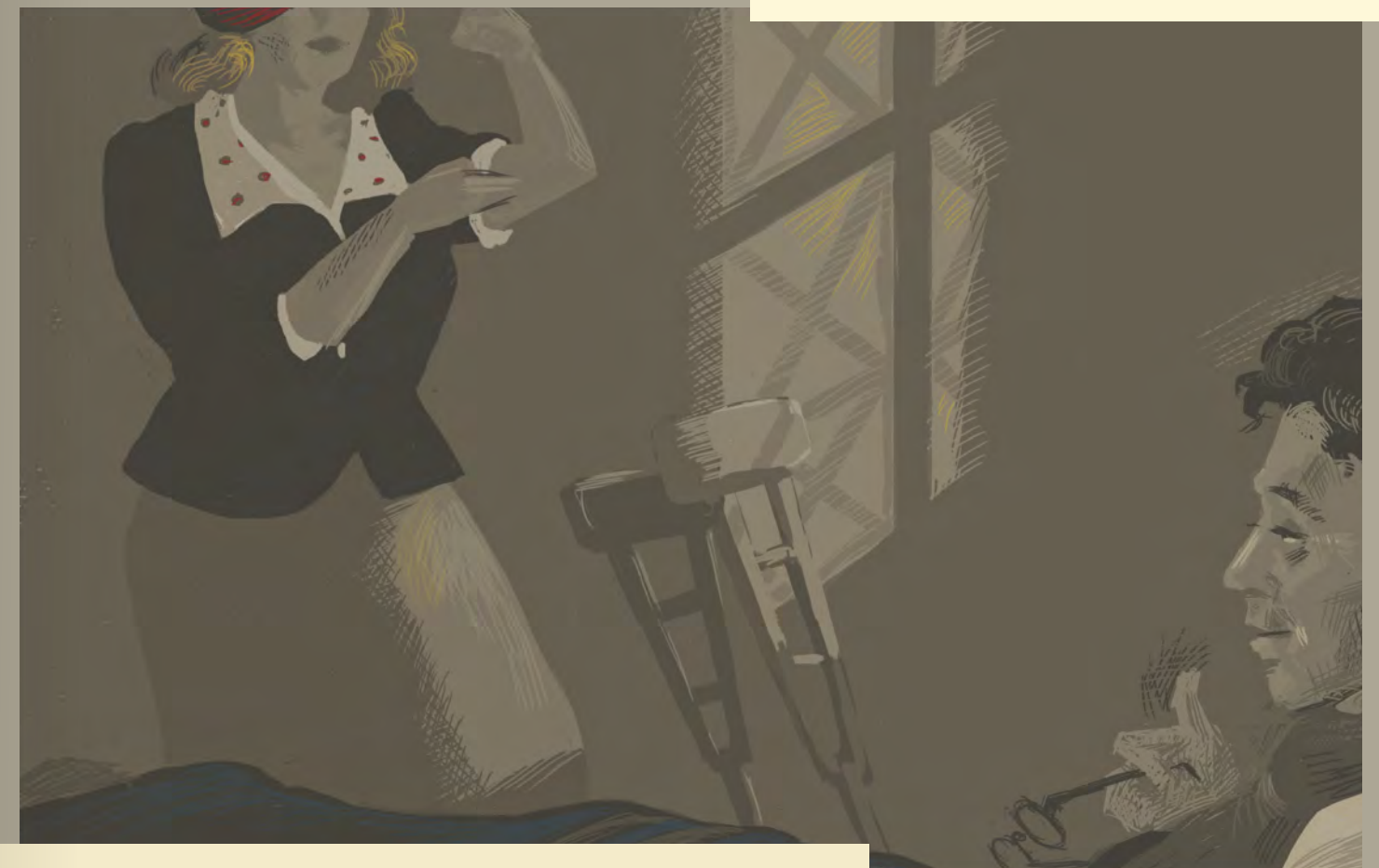
* our paternal great uncle was killed for the bread rations he was bringing home from the bakery.

In February 1942, I got less work.
I could barely move. Things were bad.



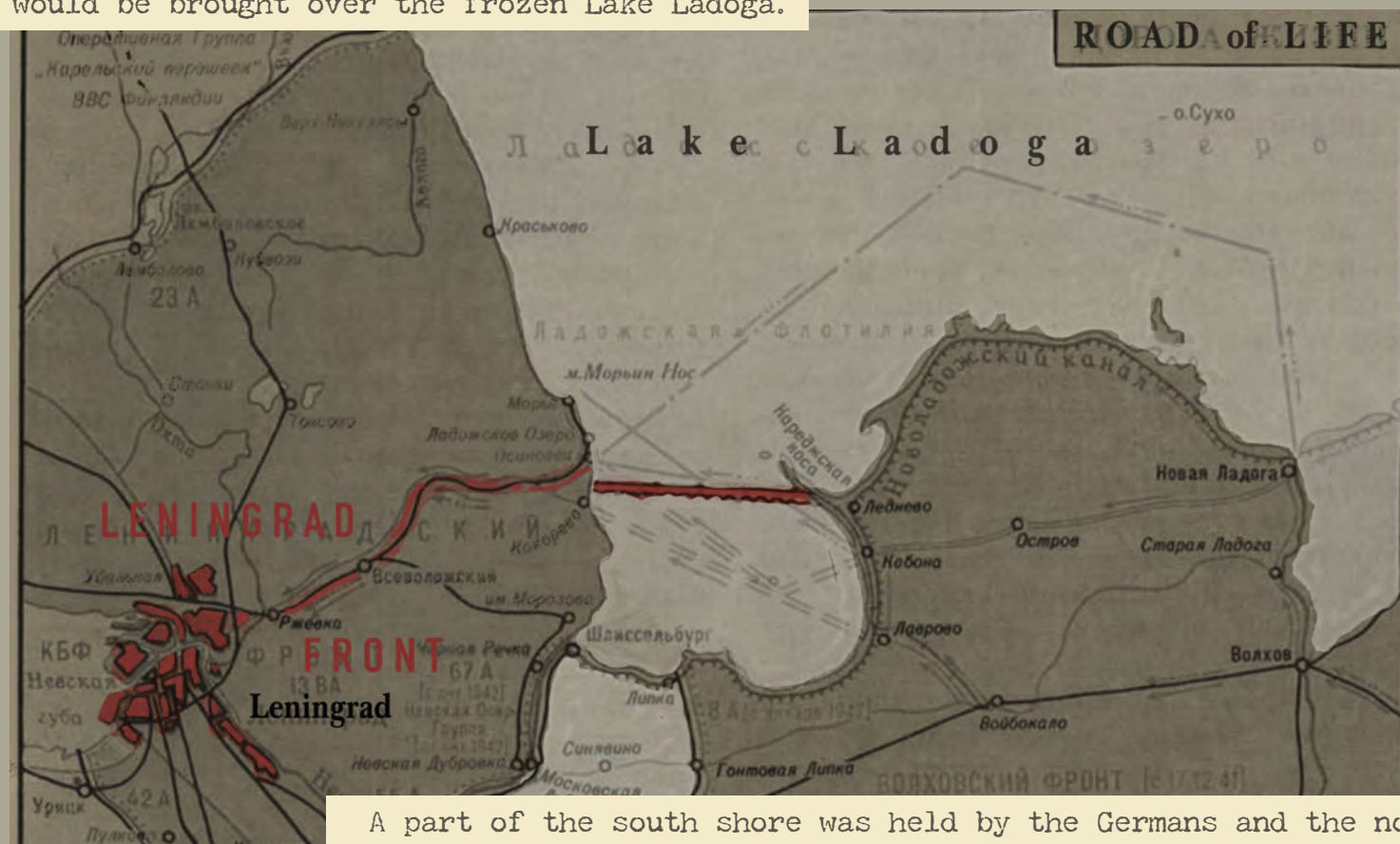
Dystrophy is when your body starts to consume itself.
The muscle and organ tissues deteriorate. The neck
swells, grey green streaks appear around your temples.

A classmate was assigned to nurse
me. Her name was Klava Pritzina.

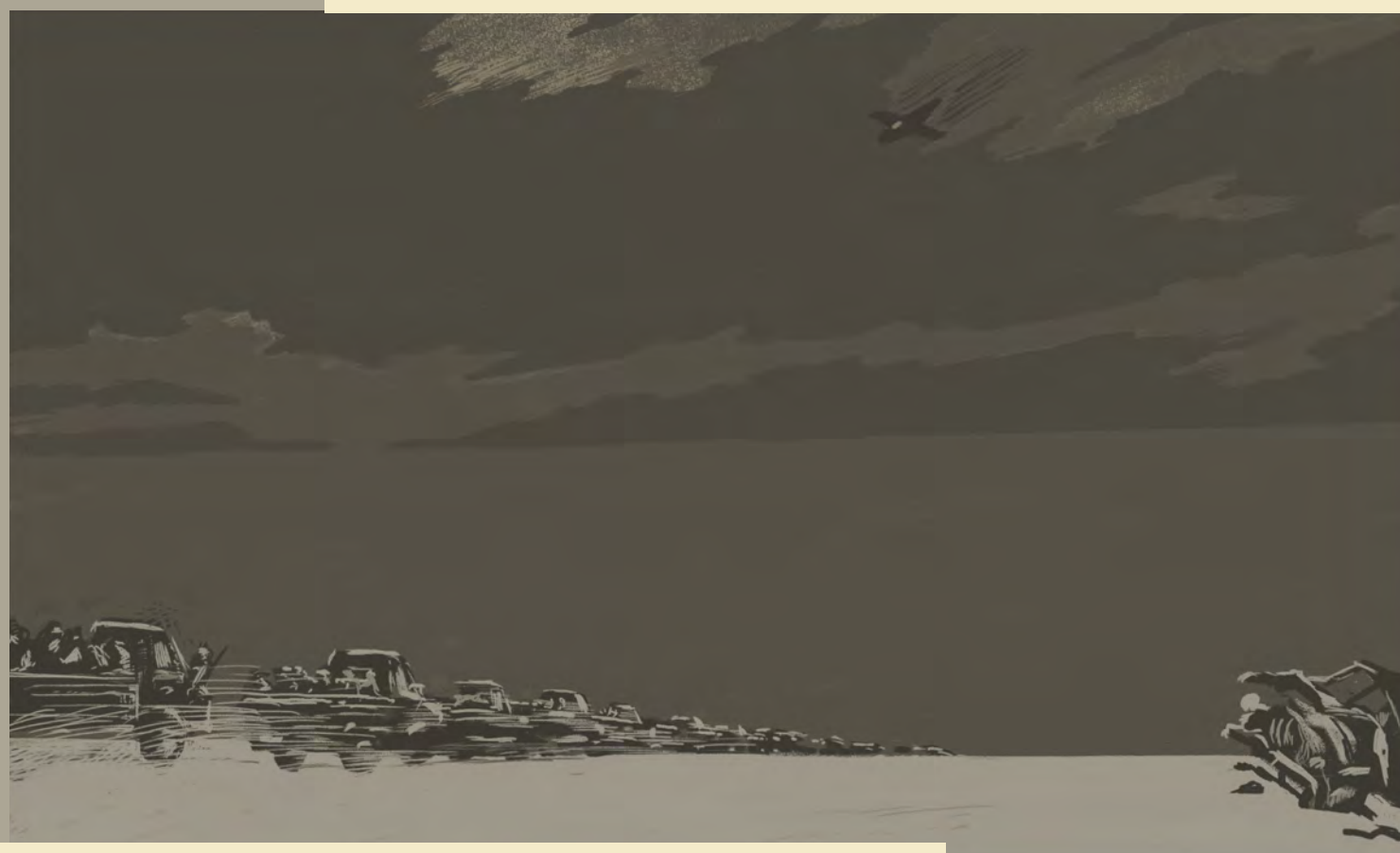


Women got through the blockade better than men.
The breasts and fat deposits helped. Many women
helped men survive during the famine.

One day Klava said the university was organizing evacuations. Students and faculty would be brought over the frozen Lake Ladoga.

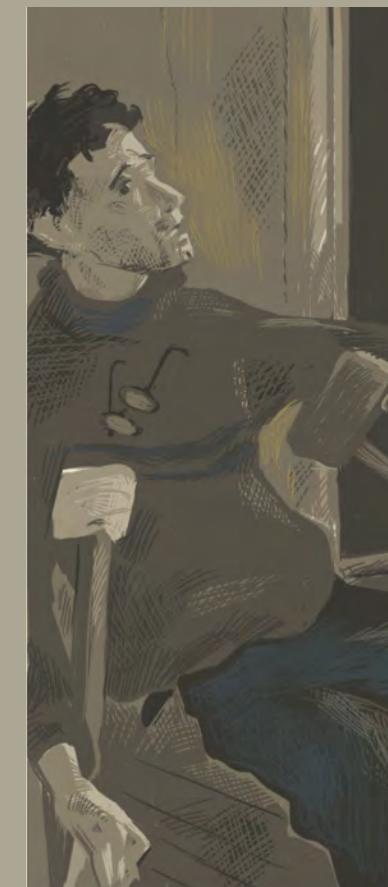


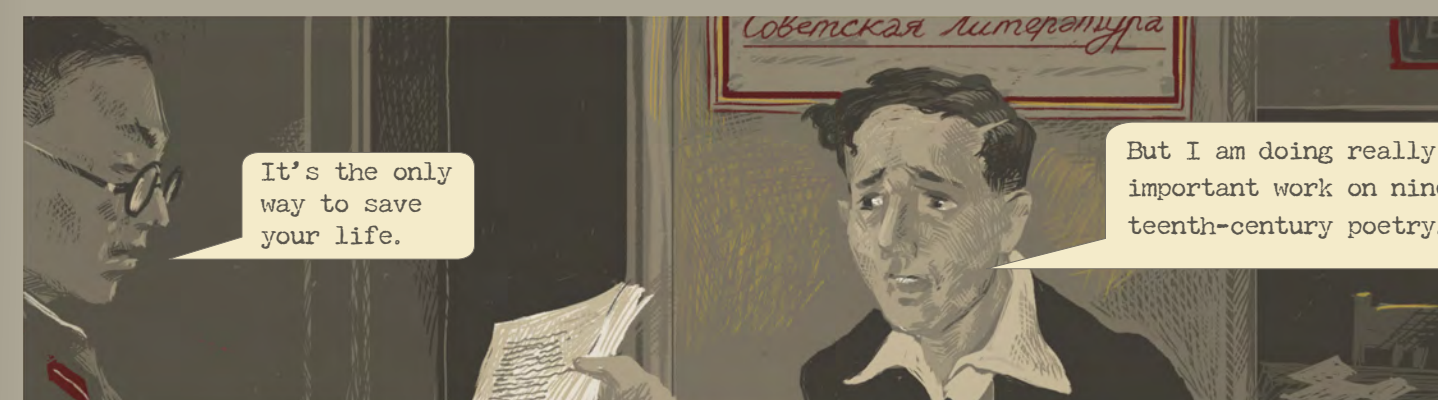
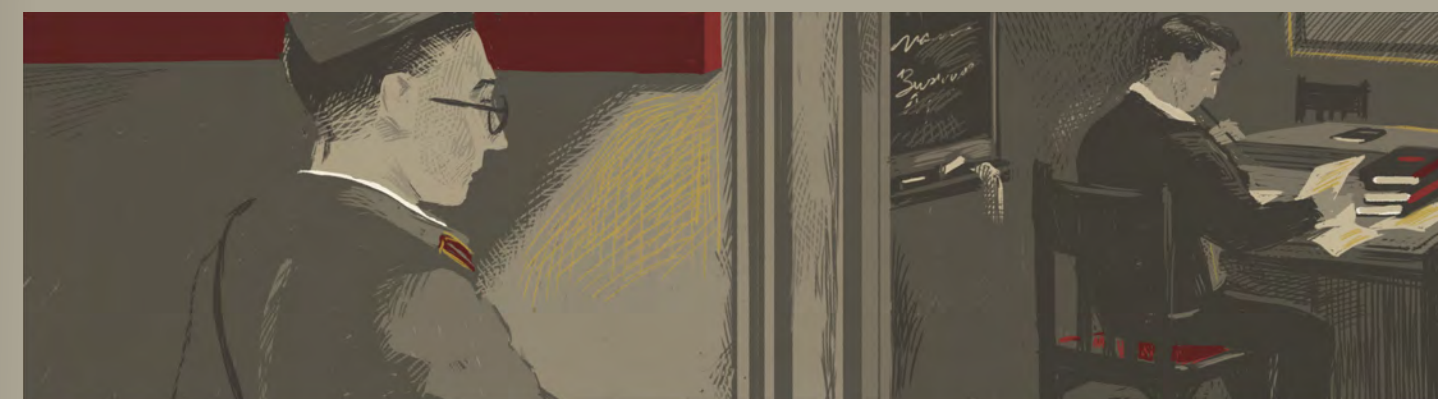
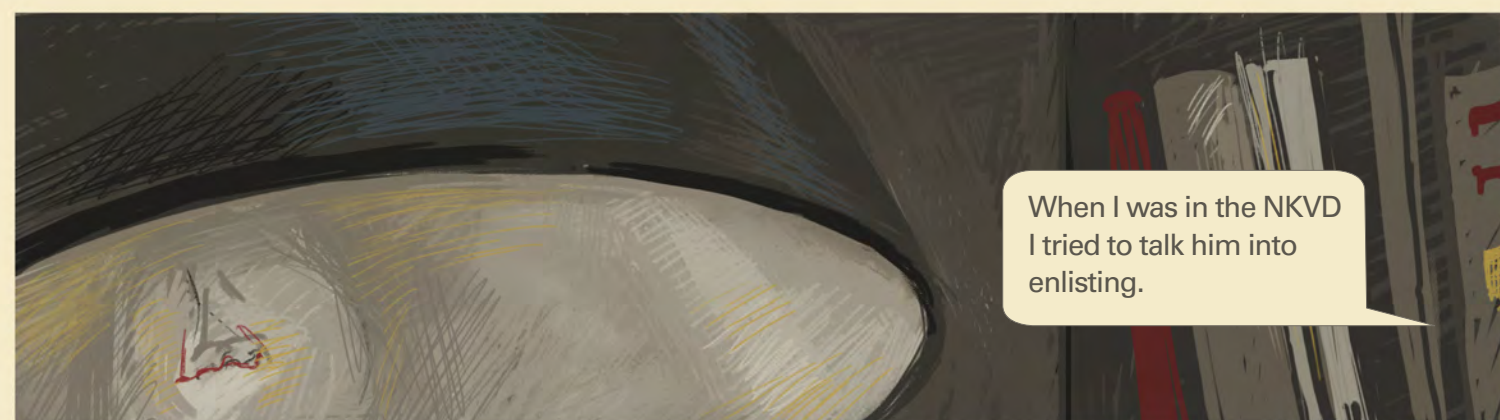
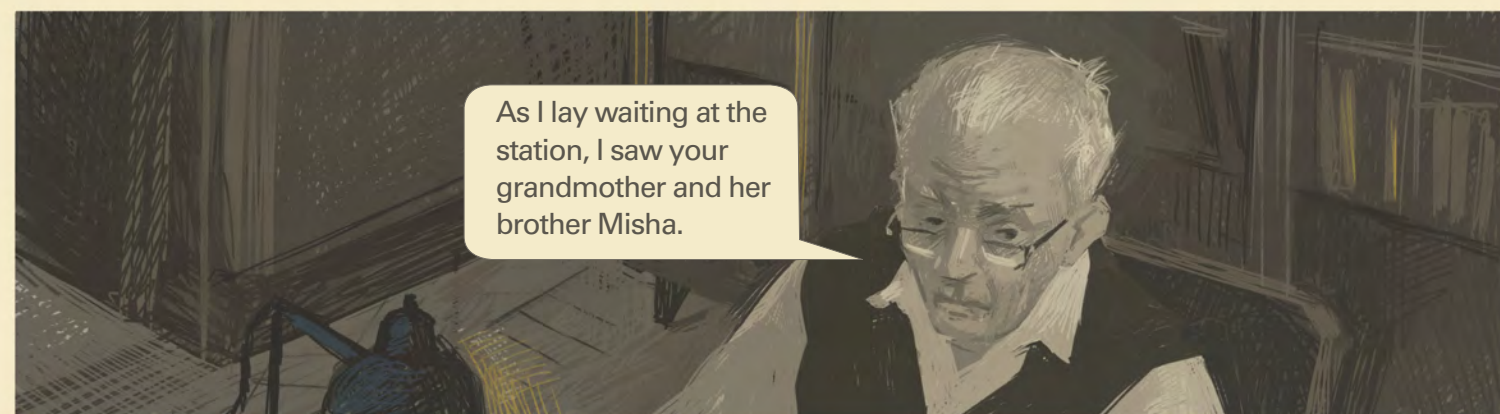
A part of the south shore was held by the Germans and the north by the Finns. But a road had been built over the ice between the city outskirts and the rest of the country. We called it the Road of Life.

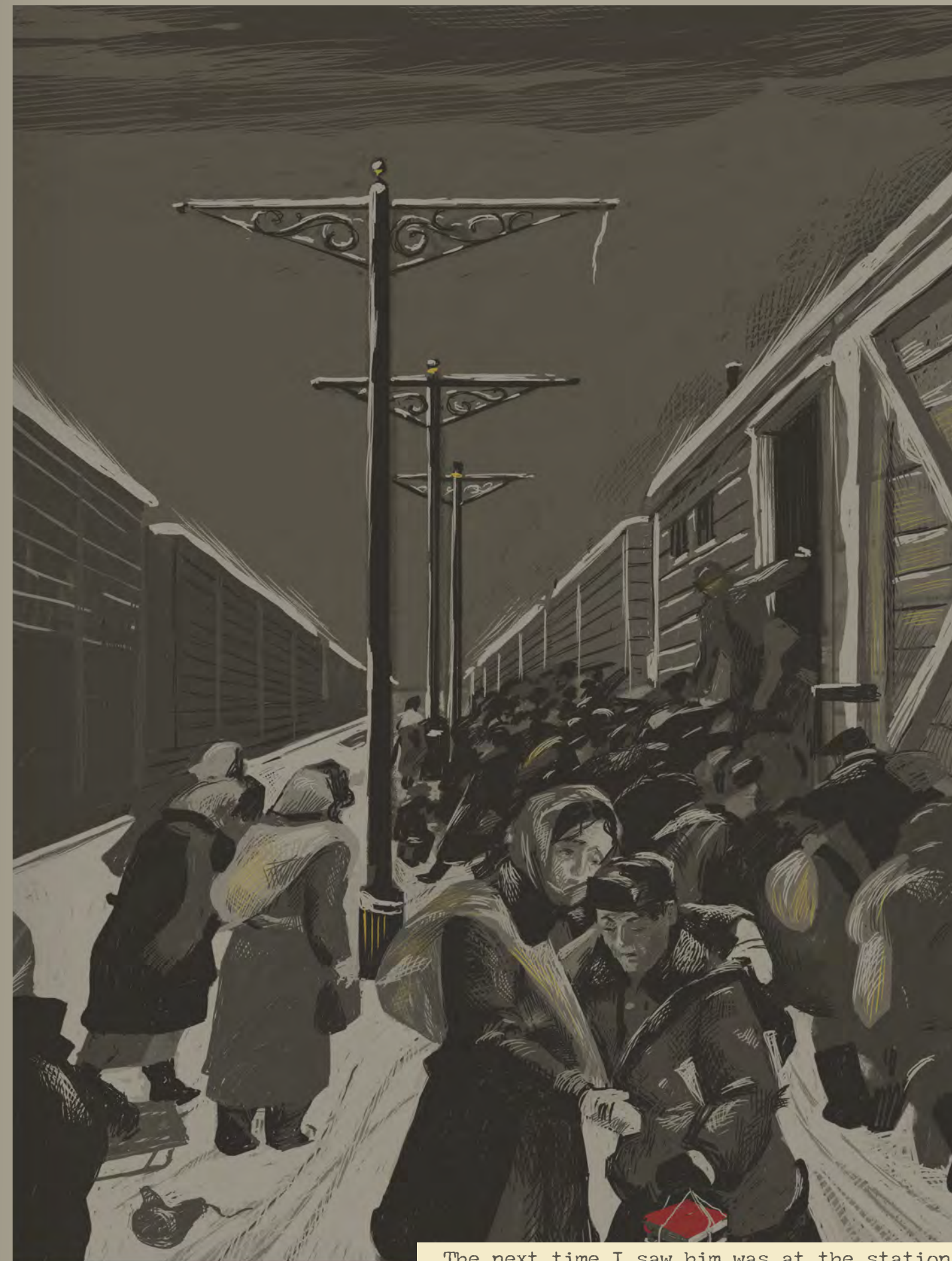


Trucks drove over the ice, bringing people out and food in. Sometimes they fell through the cracks.

I was so weak that Mother and Klava lay me on a children's sled. They pulled the sled along the frozen Neva all the way to Finland Station . . .





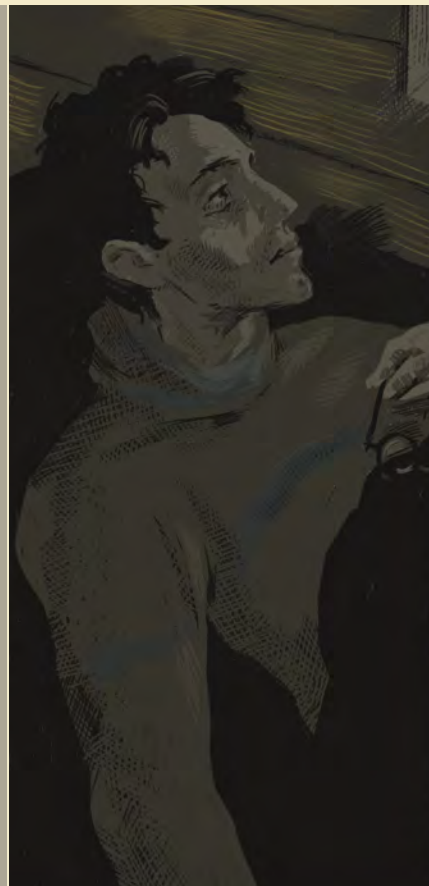


The next time I saw him was at the station. He was all swollen with dystrophy. Fira was having a really tough time with him.

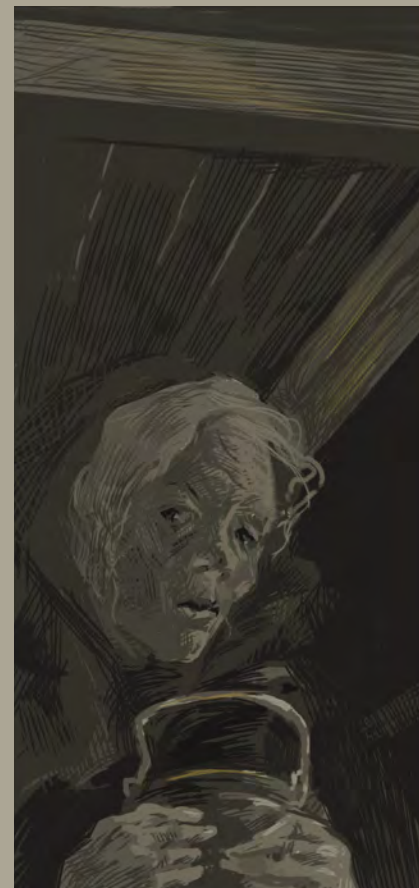
We lost sight of each other.



The train took two days to go forty miles to the lake.



128



They fed us to keep us alive for the crossing.



We were to be loaded into trucks at the final station.



129

I again saw your grandmother and Misha. She was practically carrying him. He wasn't going to make it.



But she wasn't going to leave him.



My son is malnourished. May he sit in the cabin?

Everyone's son is malnourished, lady.



We left in the truck without saying goodbye.

It started snowing. I no longer saw other trucks.



We reached the eastern shore of the lake. It wasn't the town we were headed for.



Still, it was on the rail line. We were out of the blockade.



While waiting for the train, we were issued bread. Each person got a whole loaf!



I wanted to eat it all but Klava took it away.



Many evacuees gorged themselves at the first opportunity and died from intestinal blockage.



Klava, Mama and I ended up on a different train, not the one with other students and faculty.



Evacuees from Leningrad were all dirty and lousy. We relieved ourselves right on the rails. We had lost all our self-esteem as cultured people.



A relative came to the station in Yekaterinburg. She was well dressed and well groomed in spite of the war. She could barely bring herself to touch us.



Klava got off in Kazakhstan, where she had family.



We were headed to Tajikistan, where we thought my father was stationed.

