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TELEGRAMS TO ANGEL PALMERAS: Stories from the war childhood

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The unpleasant surprise

My grandfather's home was on a slope, like an observation tower. We heard some noise, and saw a crowd at the edge of the village. A lot of people. The whole village. Not a minute passed, and the soldiers were in our yard. We all had to follow them. Hurry, hurry! We put everything into two bags and off we went. Why did we have to go? Where were we supposed to go? We didn't know! They were taking us somewhere. And my father? —He was with us when we observed the crowd, and then he ran to hide in the stable, just in case, until the crowd fanned out. The soldiers gathered us and we went off slowly. My grandparents were with us. My father's parents. When we were beside the stable, which was along our path, we imagined our father watching us through the small holes and cracks in the walls. We were just about to leave the stable behind us, when we heard a noise; someone turned around to notice what had been happening. My father stepped forward, and two armed soldiers in helmets had already surged around him. "Ooo, look, look! My mujahedeen! This is gonna be my personal mujahedeen!", said one of them, while the other was tying my father's hands with a piece of wire he'd found in my grandfather's yard. That was how, almost as a banality, the two-month era of the surreal fugitive ended. In the end, after all the escapes, he was forced to surrender himself face-to-face. Distinctly, a single straw stuck in his beard (probably why they nicknamed him mujahedeen, or perhaps not?) without him even noticing, so Mister F.'s soldiers guessed there'd been an entire troop of men inside the stable. When they got the negative answer, they fired several volleys to make sure there was no one there, showering the stable wall with bullets. Even if someone had been inside, they couldn't have been alive after that. Father told them he stepped forward because he wanted to be together with his family. Wherever they went, he would go. When he wasn't allowed to do so, my mother—just like a lawyer—started lecturing and preaching about our neighbors' morals, which earned her a boot footprint on her face while holding my two-year-old sister.

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Scene 1. Soldier-policeman K.: "How's the solitary confinement?" Father: "You know where I lie and what I eat..." (And according to my father's personal testimony, they slept on tar-covered concrete; they relieved themselves and defecated in the corner of

the room, from where the contents flowed under those lying there, and due to the unbearable heat, the stench stung their eyes and noses. They drank their own or someone else's urine, or even used it to bandage their wounds. When the smell became overpowering, they would be given cold showers with hoses—another of the myriad of torture techniques. What they ate was a neither fatty nor salty, see-through stew with one eighteenth of a loaf of bread. "If only there was less beating, it would be easier." Soldier-policeman K.: "From now on, no one is gonna lay a finger on you all." (And every day, the soldiers would line them up and beat them for half an hour or sometimes the whole hour. There were usually eleven soldiers, strategically placed around eleven "lunch" bowls. As the prisoners were having "lunch", the soldiers would count down the seconds allocated to finish the meal, without touching the prisoners, and then they would take them to the other side of the room and beat them again. An interesting way of instinctive, physical operant conditioning in order to commit to memory—just like with animals. While they were being beaten by soldiers who used bats, nightsticks and whatever they had near at hand—they even tied a car hub around a prisoner's neck—all the prisoners had to sing Nazi songs from the wry mouthed Mister F.'s repertoire. Since this meant that another of prisoners' senses was included, it was made sure that the survivors preserved and entrenched the memories of the atrocities they had endured; the memories had to remain ingrained for the rest of their lives. After some time, they started giving them dinner, which implied another two series of beating to the two they'd already been receiving. The prisoners sometimes felt relieved when the dinner was skipped. Starved and tortured, the prisoners rejoiced to have been deprived of food. Paradoxical.)

Scene 2. Father was at the end of the wall of torture. An iron fence was close-by. Father collapsed five or six times, and got up every time— threatened with a good boot, supported by the iron fence. In the blink of an eye, he heard his neighbor's voice—the neighbor from the face-to-face conversation, the soldier-policeman, the acquaintance named K., the wry mouthed Mister F.'s functionary. Father lost consciousness. He thought he'd been unconscious for ages. That was one of his most difficult days in the concentration camp. When he awoke, he asked his friends whether he'd really heard a familiar voice, the voice of his acquaintance K. They replied, "He just stood there and impassively watched everything"

Translated by Elmedin Zubović

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