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Chapter 1

Childhood

- We know your grandpa. But just who might you be?
- The two Arkady Gaidars
- Pavel Bazhov
- Cuba
- Yugoslavia
- The bookkeeper
- Summer vacation
- My favorite writer's daughter
- That strange word "inflation"
- The invasion of Czechoslovakia
- An end to childhood

If I'm not mistaken, the first question I was asked at the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR just after my appointment as deputy prime minister of the Russian government sounded something like this: "Well, everybody knows about your grandpa. But just what are *you* planning to do?" Later I had to listen to endless Communist reproaches for my supposed denial of everything my grandfather Arkady Petrovich Gaidar had gone to war for, died for, everything my father, Timur Gaidar, had fought for. I can't help but concede that the history of the country has indeed been oddly intertwined with our family history. For me, Arkady Gaidar had always seemed to exist in two different incarnations. One of these was an inseparable part of sacred Communist lore: there was the Arkady Gaidar detachment, the Arkady Gaidar *druzhina*, the Arkady Gaidar Young Pioneer Camp. At age seventeen Arkady Gaidar commanded a regiment—*Timur and His Team*.[1]

Then there was the other Arkady Gaidar, the one I knew from stories told by my father and my grandmother, and from the books I loved. The

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first was a sort of Communist saint, a knight without fear, without reproach, without doubt. The second was a talented and unhappy man, whose life was forever marked by the tragedy of revolution and civil war. This son of an Arzamas schoolteacher was thirteen years old when the tsarist regime in Russia collapsed, and cruel and troubled times set in.[2]

In a divided Russia, the logic of life and heritage propelled him toward the Reds. He firmly believed that the Communist idea meant a bright future for all humankind. At fourteen he went off to war; at fourteen he was wounded for the first time. Six years later, shell-shocked and gravely ill, he was discharged from the Red Army with the rank of regimental commander.

It all sounds very romantic, commanding a regiment at age seventeen. But one has to remember what civil war is. What a terrible fate and what an enormous burden lay behind all the "romance"; how many of your compatriots you yourself killed, and how many were killed by your order, albeit in the name of a cause that you thought just. My father would recall how my grandfather always refused to talk about the Civil War. Sometimes, if people really insisted, he might sing an army song from those days. A late diary entry reads, "I dream about the people I killed when I was young, in the war." With such a childhood and such a youth, you might well turn into a misanthrope. But this man, instead, began writing amazingly bright and sunny books.

It sometimes seems to me that, indeed, adult responsibility came upon him too soon. He simply never got much chance to play. Perhaps the book of his I love best is *School*. And when recently I visited his native Arzamas for the first time, I came to love and understand him all the more. I can't be objective about my grandfather's books. In *The Military Secret* I see his relationship with my father, and in *The Blue Cup* I recognize my grandmother's lively but rather difficult personality. Of all his books, perhaps the one I'm least fond of is *Timur and His Team*. Timur, after all, is such a painfully good little Communist.

I think that my grandfather, right up to his death in 1941, continued to believe in the same Communist idea for which he had gone to war at age fourteen. But with the passage of time it had become harder and

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harder for him to find that idea in the images of the real Communist world that surrounded him. My father says that the greatest tragedy of all for my grandfather was the arrest of Tukhachevsky and Blyukher, military leaders he had served under during the Civil War.[3] He could not believe that they were traitors, nor could he believe that the accusations against them were false. He came up with all sorts of fantastic ways to explain it to himself. One remarkable thing is that neither in his prose, nor in his journalistic work, nor in his radio broadcasts did he ever mention Stalin by name. I don't know whether this was deliberate or not. What *was* clear was that Stalin didn't fit into that bright picture of the world that Arkady Gaidar was ready to fight for.

My grandfather's sense of his world was shot through with premonitions of another terrible war soon to come. And so he considered it his duty as a writer to prepare young readers for the grave trials ahead. It would be a fierce fight; they would need all their strength in the struggle against the enemy. It was no time to be wallowing in one's own doubts, serious though they might be. Yet the closer that war came, the more yawning was the gap between what he believed and what he saw in front of him.

My father says that the war was in some sense an escape for my grandfather. It did away with any inner, psychological ambivalence; it divided the world precisely and definitively into friends and mortal enemies; it demanded clear solutions, personal courage, and a readiness to die for the cause you believed in—a readiness unclouded by any doubt over whether or not that cause was just.

My grandfather was killed in October 1941, in a skirmish between his partisan detachment and German National Socialists, the standard Russian term for whom has always been "the Fascists." I cannot fathom how the current heirs to fascism think they can claim any right to Arkady Gaidar's moral legacy. Nor, quite honestly, can I picture my grandfather in postwar Russia, with its oppressive atmosphere of patriotism on parade, its growing anti-Semitism, its pogroms against music and literature.

My father, Timur Gaidar, had a singular sort of childhood; it was si-

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multaneously interesting and rather sad. On the one hand, he had his famous, talented, endlessly creative father, the prewar Moscow intelligentsia, friends, aquaintances from Koktebel. Among the family's closest friends were the Shilov brothers, the sons of General Shilov and Yelena Sergeevna Bulgakova. The warmth he felt at Mikhail Bulgakov and Yelena Sergeevna's house was, I think, always my father's ideal of what a home should be.[4] On the other hand, there was his parents' early divorce, then his stepfather's arrest, then his mother's.

When the war started, my father was fourteen. Like other teenagers he tried to enlist for the front. Instead came work at a defense plant, then at sixteen the naval academy, then submarine service in the Baltic. This was when the still very young and naive Lieutenant Timur Gaidar wrote a letter to the Party's theoretical journal *Bolshevik*, requesting an explanation of why there were some discrepancies between recent statements by Stalin and Marxist fundamentals. Apparently the letter fell into the hands of someone fairly honest and courageous, or perhaps the name helped. At any rate, fortunately for the young lieutenant, nothing came of it.

By 1952, Timur Gaidar was attending classes in journalism at the Military-Political Academy, and there he met Ariadna Bazhova, a history instructor at the University of the Urals, and daughter of the famous writer Pavel Petrovich Bazhov.[5] On the night before their wedding he professed to her that although he considered Stalin a traitor to Leninist ideals, he nonetheless believed this sacred cause would win out in the end. Picturing how difficult her life would be from now on, Mama cried, but the straitlaced Komsomol girl went ahead and married the senior lieutenant and, as far as I know, never regretted it.

Pavel Petrovich Bazhov's life, his character, were more or less the polar opposite of Arkady Petrovich Gaidar's. If our family inherited from the Gaidar side a taste for adventure, what it got from Pavel Petrovich was tranquil good sense, steadiness. This miner's boy from the Urals had once upon a time approached his schoolteacher and asked for something to read. The teacher gave him the first volume of Pushkin's collected

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works and said that when he'd memorized it he could come and get volume two. After Pavel Bazhov had memorized Pushkin's entire collected works, the teacher decided that the boy had a good head on his shoulders and deserved a patron. Later came the theological seminary, teaching, and a long-running passion for collecting the folklore of the Urals.

During the civil war, Bazhov, like Arkady Petrovich, fought on the side of the Reds. Afterward came family life, seven children, teaching, journalism. In 1938 he was expelled from the Party and summoned by the local NKVD. My grandmother, Valentina Alexandrovna, packed a small suitcase, and my grandfather set out for that all-too-familiar Sverdlovsk address. However, by that time the trail of repressions had led back to the NKVD itself, and the terrible system had begun to break down. After hours of sitting in the waiting room, Pavel Petrovich still hadn't had his audience. Fortunately, he didn't go looking for any higher-ups to explain to him why he'd been brought in but never questioned; instead he walked out the door, went home to 11 Chapaev Street, and didn't go out again for a year. His sizable family lived on the teacher's salary brought home by my grandmother's sister, Natalya Alexandrova, and meanwhile my grandfather tended the vegetable garden and conjured over his "baby"—the enormous catalogue of folklore he had compiled during decades and decades of work.

A little more than a year after all this took place, he read my grandmother and my mother his first stories. The wave of repressions had by then begun to subside, my grandfather's Party membership was restored, and soon he became the author of that famous collection of tales *The Malachite Box.*

A kaleidoscope of my first childhood memories: Cuba, of course, looms largest. I arrived there in 1962, on the eve of the Cuban missile crisis. I was six years old. My father was working as a correspondent for *Pravda*, and had been there during the events at Playa Girón;[6] later he brought me and mama to join him. My memories of revolutionary Cuba are still amazingly vivid. Side by side with a still functioning, still intact Ameri-

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can tourist culture you saw an unfeigned revolutionary spirit among the victors, and heavily attended demonstrations. There was singing, celebration.

My windows in the Hotel Riomar looked out directly on the Gulf of Mexico; below there was a swimming pool, and beside it an artillery battery. The building that housed diplomats and specialists from Eastern Europe was shelled periodically. Our battery would return fire. From my window I could see one slogan in yellow neon: "The motherland—or death!" And one in blue: "We will be victorious!" Our maid would put her machine gun down in one corner, then pick up her mop.

Offshore, directly opposite, there was always an American reconnaissance vessel. At the height of the missile crisis you could see a haze of smoke in the distance—the American Seventh Fleet. We had guests, friends of my father's, Soviet military officers from the groups stationed there. Sometimes they would take me with them to the barracks and let me climb around on the tanks and armored personnel carriers. Raúl Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara both came to visit. My father took his pistol and went target shooting with Che Guevara.

Leftists from all over the world were terribly interested in Cuba and its fledgling revolution. There were quite a few journalists from socialist countries posted to Havana. The Czechoslovak Telegraph Agency was represented by a good friend of my father's, Jaroslav Bouček. They often argued—I didn't understand what about. But I was great friends with his children Petr and Jaroslav, who were about my age.

I remember one trip with Brian Pollitt, a British economist and son of one of the founders of the British Communist Party, and his wife Penny, in their Land Rover. We were in the northern part of Oriente, one of the wildest parts of the island, when the powerful vehicle ground to a halt, mired in swampy ground. There had been fighting in the region. My father and Brian took a pistol and went for help. They left me the other pistol, to protect the women—my mother and Penny. This was pure family tradition, and I'm convinced that my grandfather, too, would have jumped at this opportunity to give a lesson in bravery. About two

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