

Emanuel Nodel

Narrow escapes

CHAPTER ONE

The Night of the Great Invasion: The Coming of the Red Army

On an unusually warm June evening, my brother and I were sitting near the window watching people walking back and forth leisurely in the street. It was one of those Estonian summer nights when darkness never descends upon mother earth and rarely anyone, particularly young people, go to sleep before dawn. We were talking about how we would spend the coming summer. Suddenly we noticed a commotion on the street: a group of men and women were gathered talking animatedly and others began to gather in groups. Although our windows were open and we could hear voices, we were unable to make out the words. Soon curiosity got the better of us and we came down to the street. Faces were excited, gestures were flying, and tears were flowing.

Our first thoughts were that Nazi Germany invaded us. This was most logical since it was the end of June 1940, and Hitler's Germany, after a lightning victory in Poland, was master over nearly all of Europe. Here in the Baltic, especially in Estonia, however, we had lived in an illusionary secure world, under, what we thought, the protective wing of the Hitler-Stalin treaty of 1939. While nearly all of Europe was undergoing war and German occupation, we still lived visibly normal lives: our government ran the country while people worked at their jobs as usual, went to concerts, attended parties, rented summer cottages, and made long-range plans for themselves and their children.

Estonia, as well as her neighbors Latvia and Lithuania, were very prosperous, enjoying full employment and the highest living standard in our twenty-year period of independence. Yet, there were some dark clouds in our firmament: only one year ago Stalin had forced a defense treaty upon us and our Baltic neighbours establishing Soviet military bases in all three Republics.

A Red Army soldier or officer hardly ever appeared on the streets of our cities as they usually stayed on their bases. Once when I met three young Red Army soldiers standing in front of a shop window - - probably admiring our Estonian-made capitalist goods - - I stopped and addressed them in Russian, hoping to involve them in a friendly conversation. Without even a single word , they departed in a great hurry. Friends, too, had similar experiences with noncommunicative Russians, Although they had been in our country for a year, the Red Army's presence on our soil was hardly noticed.

The Soviet presence, however, was visible in other ways. As part of a cultural friendship agreement, the Soviets showered us with a very different kind of weapon: Russian culture. Exhibitions of art, concerts by pianists and violinists and performances by the Moscow Bolshioi ballet, and very impressive exhibitions of their achievements in education and health were exported. I was greatly impressed by the sheer virtuosity of the performances by Soviet artists. The exhibition of medical care in the USSR was held in Pallas, our school of art, where an entire floor was transformed into a living mirror of Soviet achievements. The walls were covered with excellent photos of Soviet school children, pregnant women, and the aged. The cleanliness of the nurseries, the white-robed doctors bent over smiling patients impressed most visitors. Although I had lived for nearly twenty years close to the Soviet border, I was, like the average Estonian citizen, totally ignorant of what the Soviet Union was, or what was going on there.

Our government, in order not to offend our powerful neighbor, did not permit any news derogatory to Soviet authorities to be printed or aired. Although the Estonian Communist party was outlawed in Estonia, our public libraries and reading rooms contained Soviet newspapers and magazines; and quite often, prior to 1939, Soviet movies were shown in most Estonian cities. Although I found the Soviet Communist press dull and uninformative, the musicals and historical films were well done artistically and quite enjoyable. The theme of social justice and the struggle against Tsarist oppression was heavily accentuated which

appealed to my generation because of its romanticized idealism.

What was shocking, however, was the Hitler-Stalin pact which contradicted Soviet artistic and literary projections of the classless and nonracist society it was building. This treaty took all Estonians by surprise regardless of their political stance. Since 1933, Radio Moscow had denounced Nazi brutalities against workers, socialists, Jews, depicting Germany as one large concentration camp where goose-stepping SS-men were parading, while peace-loving, ordinary German citizens were beaten because they opposed Hitler. After nearly six years we became accustomed to those tirades, and, since similar facts appeared in Western European newspapers, we had no reason to disbelieve Soviet anti-Nazi propaganda. Suddenly, on August 23, 1939, literally overnight, Nazi Germany was depicted by Soviet radio stations as a champion of the Socialist cause, a friend of peace and an enemy of imperialism.

During the early stages of World War II rumors were circulating in the three Baltic states that either Germany or the Soviet Union would invade. The average Baltic citizen was apprehensive. None of us wanted the Germans, who were particularly disliked in Estonia and Latvia, nor the Russians. Six hundred years of German oppression had not been forgotten in Estonia and Latvia. Two generations still had vivid recollections of Communist atrocities during the bloody war of independence against Lenin's Bolshevik Russia. While people did not seem to notice the war outwardly, in the back of our minds a feeling of uncertainty existed. This idyllic situation would not go on forever. One of our giant neighbors would grab us with their powerful hands and extinguish our precious peace and short-lived independence which we so thoroughly enjoyed.

Looking at the anxious expressions on peoples faces in the street, Semka and I both asked, is our idyllic life coming to an end? Not able to suppress our curiosity any longer, we asked two men about the commotion. Looking at us with great surprise, one of them said quietly, "The Red Army has crossed our border..."

Our faces froze and although we did not realize the full significance of the event at that moment, we instinctively felt that something awful was happening which would greatly affect the fate of Estonia as well as our personal destinies. While trying to comprehend the historic event, we heard someone say: "The President of the Republic is on the radio..."

We quickly ran up to our apartment and switched on the radio. The old, familiar voice of President Pats, obviously trembling, announced: "Citizens, it is with great sadness that I have to inform you about the terrible news: the Red Army has just crossed our border." he asked every citizen to remain calm and not provoke the invaders. He concluded, his voice breaking midway through every sentence, "Please do not resist. Resistance is futile. It will only cause terrible bloodshed and the destruction of our country..." He stopped abruptly and a long silence followed.

Semka and I looked at each other and, without saying a word, returned to the street possessed by a strange feeling of helplessness as well as excitement and curiosity, a feeling only youth can experience in the face of adversity.

Although our city, Tartu, was only less than a day's journey from the Russian border, we knew nothing about our powerful and mysterious neighbours. Now the inevitable happened - - Communist Russia had taken us over. With such thoughts we walked slowly toward the center of our town. Despite the increasing darkness, more and more people assembled on the streets. Hours passed silently until the early hours of morning when the sound of oncoming vehicles rumbled ominously. Through the morning fog a column of Russian tanks appeared in the distance. Thousands froze where they stood in deadly silence watching as hundreds of Russian tanks followed by infantry and artillery slowly entered the city.

The feeling of helplessness in the face of the overpowering force of evil was shared by those who watched the encroachment of the Russian military on our little country in the early dusk. For several hours we stood watching the Red units passing us by until we felt tired and worn out. Even our ex-

citement subsided: it was too much to absorb in one night. Semka and I returned home disconsolately and went to sleep.

We awoke the next day, still tired, ate our breakfast quickly, and left our apartment silently. More people gathered on the streets than usual, but less than last night. We reached the farmer's market where the Russian cavalry was stationed - several hundred soldiers with their horses. From a close distance, townspeople looked upon the soldiers with quiet curiosity as though they were people from another world - - as indeed they were to us. The soldiers, wearing crumpled uniforms and soot black boots, showed exhaustion on their faces. They must have been on the move for many, many hours. Sitting on the cobblestones, near their horses, their rifles were in a circle with the bayonettes touching each other. When I came within a hundred feet of them, a young lieutenant left the circle and approached the silent crowd.

Loudly, and in a clear voice, he asked in Russian: "Is there anyone who understands and speaks Russian?" Since it was only three years since I had graduated from the Russian gymnasium, I spoke it fluently. Without much thought I stepped forward saying "I do".

He looked at me for a moment, hesitated before asking "Could you lead my horse to a well?" I turned around and walked toward the nearest water pump while he led the horse behind me. After we reached the water pump and the horse drank, I assumed my service done and started to walk back. "Wait, young man, for me," he called out. I stopped and accompanied him to the bivouacked soldiers. Entering a tent while I patiently waited outside, he came out in a minute holding a bottle of vodka and two glasses in his hand. "Let us have a drink for comrade Stalin" he said with a smile.

I looked at the bottle in amazement. I did not expect Russian hospitality to be so quick! Just looking at the full glass of vodka, I became dizzy. I had never drunk a whole glass of vodka at once, yet I did not dare to refuse the officer's hospitality. Quickly I thought of a way out of my predicament. "Comrade Lieutenant", I said, "I am not used to drinking on an empty stomach". He mumbled something under his nose, entered the tent, and returned with a large,

unpeeled onion. Cutting the onion in two with his bayonette, he offered me a half.

"There, smell it". I took the onion, smelled it and, with desperate determination, gulped down the whole glass. Within a few seconds, I began to feel dizzy. I knew that I would soon lose consciousness.

"Please excuse me, sir," I mumbled, and quickly ran to my apartment several blocks away. Within a few minutes, I had reached our front door and rung the doorbell. When my mother opened the door, I stumbled in - - and passed out.

The following days passed in a daze. Officially the Red Army came to liberate the Estonian people from its capitalist government and protect against Nazi invasion. The Soviet government in Moscow announced that it would not interfere in our internal development. The presence of the Red Army, however, changed the country overnight politically. The Estonian Communist Party came out from the underground. People never suspected of being Communists, suddenly turned out to be the most active members. Meetings went on day and night in the city. Workers were assembled in their factories while Communist speakers explained to them about why the Red Army entered independent Estonia. Since the union movement had been stifled by the government of Konstantin Pats, the Communist speakers urged the workers to actively participate in a new union "free from capitalist oppressiveness". Mass meetings were not limited only to factory workers: students of Tartu University as well as those at the Pallas Art School and the Music Academy also attended.

The speakers were usually young men of Estonian and Russian ethnic origin, mostly middle class, but sometimes of proletarian origin. They spoke enthusiastically, convincingly and with great pathos. They truly believed in their own words. They appealed to the idealism of the young students to come out and actively support the newly formed Estonian government in Tallinn, our capital. This new government would be friendly to the Soviet Union, unlike the previous one of Pats. It would, they insisted, bring social justice and equal opportunity to all citizens of Estonia, regardless of class or ethnic origin.

Most listened attentively, some critically, many with great interest. As it was my summer vacation from my university, I had leisure time to roam the streets, going from meeting to meeting to hear the latest about political developments. Listening to the impassioned speeches and the conversations of students concerning the future of Estonia, I was in touch with the mood of the country. Most people were apprehensive, wondering if Communist Russia would swallow us gently or absorb us without a trace?

We knew little about the real nature of Russia - - Stalin's oppressive rule, purges and concentration camps, mass poverty and the rule of a small oligarchy over a vast majority. The new Communist Estonian government in Tallinn announced that private enterprise would remain, but that the capitalist owners would have to share their profits with their workers. How this was supposed to be achieved, no one knew. Factories, shops, and stores were still legally owned by their proprietors. Food was plentiful, shops were filled with goods and there were no shortages of basic goods. In the factories and shops, workers were ordered by authorities to organize special committees to supervise their masters activities; profits were limited to a certain percentage. In the countryside, committees were organized among the landless peasants and those who had a few acres. The new government promised them land via land reform. Soon a new Estonian constitution was issued which provided for the limitation of land ownership to 30 acres (hectare). Surplus land, confiscated from those peasants who owned more than 30 acres, was to be given to the landless and poor peasants. The new Estonian constitution even provided a clause which protected the peasants from being compelled to join a collective farm.

Obviously Moscow was moving cautiously in the newly-acquired Baltic republic. It did not wish to galvanize the Estonian peasants into violent opposition when it needed a calm buffer zone between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. July, the first month, was a honeymoon of sorts. Moscow did not really show its true intent in the Baltic. Its propaganda consisted mostly of sweet talk about protecting the Baltic from Nazi invasion.

Since 1934 Estonia had indeed moved from a true liberal democracy to an authoritarian one-party state with state-controlled education, unions, and press. In spite of the authoritarianism and nationalism of the Konstantin Pats regime, the fundamental tradition of toleration for ethnic minorities - - 100,000 Russians, 25,000 Germans and 4,500 Jews - - who enjoyed the only full national and religious autonomy in Europe since the establishment of Estonia in 1918, had not been tampered with nor limited in any way. Within a month after the Red Army occupation, the new Estonian government ordered the dissolution of all "voluntary" organizations: the Boy Scouts, the Estonian Civil Guard (the Kaitseliit), the Young Hawks (Noored Kotkad), and all religious and ethnic organizations, just to mention a few.

Though one of the smallest minorities, the small Estonian Jewish community, to which I belonged, suffered more after the arrival of the Red Army than any other ethnic group. The Germans, under a special agreement between Moscow and Berlin, were in the final stages of being evacuated from Estonia, as they were from the other two Baltic States, to the newly conquered western provinces of Poland. To them it did not matter if there was no more German cultural autonomy: they were on their way to their "new" Fatherland: Greater Germany. To the Russians, the largest single minority, Soviet occupation, was a mixed blessing: while on one hand they retained their educational system, clubs and cultural organizations, the Russian Greek Orthodox Church fell victim to the harsh treatment of all religious denominations beginning to be exercised by Moscow.

The Jewish community, however, lost every aspect of its ethnic and religious life. By order of the new Estonian government, the minority status of Jews was abolished; they were proclaimed ordinary citizens of the new Socialist Soviet Estonian Republic. They lost the right to practice their religion, to maintain their educational system as well as their cultural and social organizations. I was president of the Jewish Student Association - an umbrella organization for all Jewish fraternities in Tartu. In July, I had to bring to the new

Militia, the former Police, all the books - - bank accounts, student lists - - as the outgoing president. I had been very active in Jewish public life and particularly in Jewish student life. Many sweet memories went through my head as I returned from the Militia: the innocent days of my freshman year with its bull-sessions; cramming nights before examinations; the wonderful parties and picnics we had; the friendships; the hopes and fears we shared. Now it was all over. We all became citizens of a new state, a Soviet State, run from Moscow, with a war still raging not far from the Baltic shores, and with dark clouds of an unknown future over our heads.

Through the grapevine, news began to trickle down about peoples' disappearance without a trace. First I, and most of my friends, thought there were exceptional cases. But the reported disappearances began to increase and people began to shy away from talking to each other. Fear began to spread. The honeymoon ended.

Together with the reorganization of unions, two new organizations appeared on the political horizon: the Komsomol and the Estonian Communist Party. The Komsomol, or the Communist Youth, were organized by young men and women at places of work: in factories, shops, universities and other schools of higher learning, in business offices and in the countryside. Many public meetings were held in our city. The speakers were in their early twenties, mostly men, mostly of Estonian origin, although occasionally native Russian speakers addressed mixed Estonian-Russian groups. Their speeches rang out the party line: the Red Army had saved Estonia from Nazi occupation and the new Communist government would open truly democratic opportunities for all citizens, regardless of social origin or nationality. The Komsomol was described as a nonpolitical youth organization whose aim it was to bring young people together so that they could learn to build a new, socialistic society based upon social justice and humanity.

In addition, the speakers stressed the fact that the Komsomol would enable young people aged 14 to 26 to learn various skills, like photography, painting, music, skiing,

public speaking and teach them political skills - - geography, history - - which our "capitalist" public education failed to have given them - - so that they would understand the world in which they live. It sounded very impressive. Young people, idealistic by nature, found the rosy picture of the Komsomol quite attractive. At the end of a meeting, the speakers asked those who were interested in joining the Komsomol to approach him. Although many young men or women did not volunteer at the beginning of the Komsomol drive for membership, gradually more began to join, many out of curiosity, others because they were attracted by its idealistic appeal, still others because it seemed to them a good vehicle

It was obvious that the government wanted to quickly get hold of the youth of Estonia and build a mass-organization that they could mold and control. The Estonian Communist Party, however, remained an elite, modeled on the Russian Communist Party. From some of my friends who joined the Communist Party, I found out that it was not very difficult to join it, provided one did not belong to the "former oppressors": capitalists, police, army officers, rich peasants.

In the midst of political turmoil I began to look for a job. I found out about a job opening as a social worker through one of my friends who worked at the city hall. I applied and was promptly hired. My immediate supervisor, a middle-aged Estonian with a kind face and twinkle in his eyes, explained my duties to me: I was to be in charge of 12 cases who would need my assistance and supervision. Jaan, my supervisor, showed me the cards of each case: a drunken worker who beat his wife; a poor, old widow who lived alone in a cold and moldy basement; a young widow with four children who did not know how to discipline and control her children, and several others.

"Your duty, my dear Emanuel will be to come to work six days a week at 9 a.m., take your files and begin to make the rounds."

I must have looked a little bit lost because Jaan put his hand on my shoulder and said benignly: "Do not worry. Do the best you can to help them. Don't try too hard. You will

learn on the job..."

My job turned out to be quite complicated, but never dull. It was a constant challenge. I had no instructions on how to deal with each case and had to make my own decisions as I went along. After three weeks, I got the feeling for my new job and began to enjoy it. One morning I got up at quarter to nine. Realizing I was late, I quickly dressed and pedalled my bike hurriedly. I arrived at exactly 20 minutes past nine. Before I could reach my desk and pick up my files, the Head of the Department, a Soviet Russian, of Social Work asked me to come to his office. He was a short and skinny man, in his early forties, with sharp black eyes, short black hair and a rather unpleasant expression on his face. "Comrade Nodel" he said sternly, "you have just broken Soviet Law. Are you aware of it?" "Yes," I said solemnly. I explained what happened and apologized.

He gazed at me for a moment and then sternly said, "You know, according to Soviet Labor Law I can give you three years in prison for intentionally breaking the law."

For a moment I stood silent, and replied respectfully: "But I did not break Soviet Law intentionally."

"Get out and be quiet." I left his room depressed and frightened. I went to my desk and sat motionless. I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Jaan, my supervisor. I told Jaan what had happened. "Don't worry" he said, "I will talk to Comrade Nicholayev."

That day my casework did not seem to hold my attention. I somehow managed to finish the day and by four I returned to my office to complete my paper work. Shortly before five the Russian director appeared in the main room and asked for everybody's attention. He motioned for me to come forward. I got up from behind my desk and stepped forward. With a clear, stern voice and with a heavy Russian accent, Comrade Nicholayev began to read, "Comrade Nodel broke our great Soviet Labor Law. According to paragraph 319 he is liable up to three years of prison. However, in view of the fact that it was his first offense, I shall punish him by deducting 25 percent from his salary for the next six months." He looked up from his paper, and returned to his office..

I let out a sigh of great relief. None of my co-workers said a single word to me as I got ready to go home. At the door I saw Jaan. He was smiling as we left together.

"You know, dear Emanuel", he said, "I got you off lightly."

"How?" I asked quizzically.

Jaan smiled again. "I will tell you a little secret. Our new Soviet boss does not know a thing about social work so I do all the work for him." He winked good-bye grinning broadly.

Gradually work at the Department of Social Work became more and more difficult because of the increase in new Soviet regulations which required more and more paperwork. Little time was left to do what we felt we were supposed to do: help people. Social workers began to leave. By the end of September I left the Social Work department relieved. The semester at Tartu University was in full swing and I was in search of a job which would not occupy my entire week, but leave me enough time to study.