

CHAPTER ONE

On the night of June 2, 1924, my mother, nineteen-year-old Sofia Lvovna Balk, known as Sonechka, fled Moscow on the Trans-Siberian Railway. She was bound for China.

In Shanghai, freed from the clutches of the Bolsheviks, Sonechka became an exile, longing to return to her pre-revolutionary Motherland. Her faith in God and her memories of an idyllic childhood in the Crimea proved to be a great solace throughout her life-long exile.

Sonechka used to recall basking in the sun on the veranda of her family home in the Crimean resort town, Alushta. She was cooled by a gentle breeze drifting in from the Black Sea.

Her earliest recollections were of sitting on the steps of the veranda surrounded by a profusion of flowers whose fragrance filled the air. Here she listened to the soothing sound of her *mamochka* (diminutive of mother) playing the piano. Papa would be sitting close by in an ancient carved rocking chair, savouring a pungent Turkish cigarette.

Madly in love, Sonechka's parents, Lev Alexandrovich and Anastasia Nikolayevna, had eloped in their late teens. Anastasia's parents were outraged and disinherited her. However, in 1904, the year of Sonechka's birth, Anastasia had the good fortune to inherit a gracious property set in extensive grounds in Alushta. She and Lev converted it into a luxurious pension. The summer months brought an influx of lodgers, mainly escapees from the stifling heat of St Petersburg and Moscow. Besides the scenery and historic sites, these summer guests came to enjoy the sea air and gentle climate. The house burst at its seams with these loyal holidaymakers. They enjoyed Lev's animated stories, in particular his tales of fearsome bandits who had once inhabited the nearby mountains.

Sonechka often recalled how her papa would take their guests on pleasure trips in the family's rather grand but faded landau, a horse-drawn carriage, along the beautiful Tauride coast, known as Russia's Riviera. As a special

treat, she was allowed to join these tours, which were enlivened by her papa's commentaries. Bright and festive villas built by the nobility lined the route as did a number of exotic palaces perched on cliff tops with their underground grottos, galleries and labyrinths. Sonechka was fascinated by the remnants of fortresses built by the Crimea's many different rulers, including Greeks, Romans, Persians, Mongols, Tartars, Turks, Venetians and Russians.

During these tours the guests would listen, enchanted, to her papa reciting poems by Pushkin and Lermontov. Alushta had earlier paid tribute to Pushkin, the Shakespeare of Russian literature, by erecting an elegant, life-size, commemorative statute of him. The Tauride coast also inspired Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky and Leo Tolstoy, who had been an artillery officer in the Crimean War in the 1850s. Crimea was a Mecca not only for renowned writers, but also for many others in the world of arts, including painters, musicians and actors who either lived there or stayed for long periods.

Anastasia supervised the household, the paying guests, and the extended family. Sonechka was the youngest of four children. Mikhail, known as Mishka, Yelizaveta, known as Liza and Alexander, known as Sasha, were respectively four, six, and ten years older than her. Sonechka adored her big brother, Sasha. In her eyes, he was the cleverest of boys. She loved creeping silently into the room when a guest sat for Sasha to paint their portrait. These portraits, it was said, revealed their inner souls. As Sonechka grew older, Sasha let her accompany him on his painting expeditions. She would sit for hours watching him paint, marvelling at how he caught on canvas the subtle changes of light and shadow at dawn and dusk as they played across the nearby mountains and sea. He told her of his secret wish to one day gain a place at St Petersburg's Royal Academy of Art. She recalled how Anastasia proudly displayed Sasha's works of art in her study.

Lev, who had inherited an extensive library, encouraged the family to read. From an early age, my mother loved reading. She devoured the accounts of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn's lives. Their adventures made her want to visit America to see the great Mississippi River with its famed riverboats. As she grew older her yearning to travel increased, inspired by reading Jules Verne and Pushkin, while Sir Walter Scott awakened her romantic imagination.

Towards the end of each summer season the family staged a play. Nearly everyone in the household participated. Friends and neighbours and most of the local inhabitants looked forward to this yearly spectacle. Aged six, Sonechka was delighted with her first role, even if it was only a small part. It was an

introduction to an art form that would forever fascinate her.

Chekhov was one of the family's favourite playwrights. He had lived in Yalta, 40 kilometres from Alushta, from 1899 to 1904 when he wrote 'The Three Sisters' and 'The Cherry Orchard'. He was born in Taganrog on the Sea of Azov, which borders the Crimean Peninsula.

During rehearsals Lev revelled in the role of director, which he carried out with great panache. His booming voice could be heard reverberating throughout the house. Sasha displayed his artistic skills in painting wonderful stage sets. The play took most of August to produce. Each year, Lev went to great lengths to persuade Anastasia to take part in the play, but to no avail. Fixing her bewitching, deep violet-blue eyes on him, she would murmur, 'Levushka, someone has to remain sane in this household,' or words to that effect.

The adventurous Mishka seemed incapable of keeping out of trouble. One summer's afternoon he lured Sonechka down to the pond built by their *dedushka* (grandfather), located in an overgrown part of their extensive garden. Mishka and his gang of mischievous playmates made this pond the focal point of their secret hideaway. Holding her hand he guided her through dense undergrowth towards what he described as 'the promised land of Robinson Crusoe'.

On reaching a steep mound, a clearing appeared that led to the fabled pond. 'Look!' he exclaimed, grinning with pride. 'We've built a swing on this overhanging branch at the edge of our pond.' He then jumped onto the wooden seat and got Sonechka to push him higher and higher.

She begged him to let her have a turn. He paused, looked around, and said, 'I can only let you have a short ride because we don't allow girls to come here.' Having hoisted her onto the seat, he then propelled her forwards with a mighty shove, shouting out, 'For heaven's sake, hold on tight!' How she loved the sensation of flying through the air. Suddenly, she felt herself falling. Unable to keep hold of the swing ropes, she pitched head first into the pond. Mishka plunged into the water and dragged her out. Soaked and covered in mud, but uninjured, she returned home with the chastened Mishka. Besides banning him from playing in the pond area, their parents had him copy out pages and pages of verse.

During the winters at Alushta, Glasha, the cook, often said to Sonechka, 'Come into the kitchen and play by the *pechka* (a large stove).' From morning till night there was always something baking in its great oven.

Glasha liked reminiscing about the 'good old days' when *dedushka* ruled the household. A generous host, he presided over frequent large gatherings of family and friends. Sonechka recalled how Glasha, pausing for effect and

sighing in despair, would say, ‘Whatever happened to the old-fashioned hospitality practised by Nikolai Dmitriyevich (*dedushka*). His doors were always open to neighbours and visitors. Alas, today the guests must pay! *Ab, Bozhe moi, Bozhe moi!* (Oh, my God, Oh my God!) What’s the world coming to?’

She would then turn to the icon corner of the kitchen, lit by a *lampada* (oil lamp), and cross herself.

Sonechka recalled how Liza and papa often engaged in animated and, at times, acrimonious discussions on a wide range of subjects. Disdainful of Liza, Glasha would call her ‘*nasha molodaya barinya*’ (our young madam).

Aunt Olya (Olga), an elderly aunt of Sonechka’s mother lived with them. A great beauty in her day, she married Andrei Ignatyevich, the owner of a large estate in the Simferopol region managed by a German agent. Each autumn, they went ‘for the season’, first to St Petersburg and then on to Europe, returning home for the traditional Easter family reunions. Andrei, who liked to gamble, was well known in Baden Baden and other glamorous European spas and holiday towns. They did this for twenty years, until, as Lev liked to say, with a dismissive shrug of the shoulders, ‘the money ran out’.

The petite, elegant Aunt Olya would sit on the veranda in the afternoons sipping her tea at an elegant table dominated by a magnificent silver samovar. Irrespective of the weather she always wrapped herself in a shawl or two. Comfortably settled in her armchair, she would engage in conversation with whoever was within earshot.

Sonechka loved listening to her reminiscing about St Petersburg’s fabulous balls and troika sleigh rides along the city’s frozen Neva River. Aunt Olya had met Andrei Ignatyevich, a dashing young guards officer, in St Petersburg. After a whirlwind romance they were married and went to live on his estate. Their greatest disappointment was that both their children died in infancy.

Once the summer guests had departed, life at their home took on an altogether different character. Lev supervised the harvest of the fruit trees and olive groves, while Glasha, mama and Aunt Olya bottled the preserves. Around the time of Sonechka’s birthday in early October, they picked mushrooms in the neighbouring wooded slopes; it was a popular activity. The innumerable basket loads were either pickled or laid out to dry on the flat rooftop of the large building next to the kitchen.

The rhythm of the house slowed down even more during the winter months. By Moscow and St Petersburg standards, the Tauride coast winters were mild. Even so, the family spent much of the winter in the dining room, where a large fireplace kept them warm. The treasured samovar would occupy

a prominent position on the dining table.

After supper, Aunt Olya produced one of a variety of handicrafts from her distinctive sewing basket and recommenced whatever she had been doing the previous evening. Lev read out loud from a newspaper, a passage from a recently published book or from a collection of poems. Anastasia mended garments or did similar handiwork. Sasha and Liza enjoyed these witty conversations. Lev tried hard to involve Mishka in these discussions, but to no avail. The practical Mishka, who loved action, had no interest in politics, literature or the arts. Though much of what was said passed over Sonechka's head, she enjoyed listening and learned a lot, while playing with Marusya, her favourite doll.

Anastasia always put Sonechka to bed and they would pray together. Brought up in a deeply religious family, Anastasia wanted her children to base their lives on Christ's teachings and would read Sonechka the life of the saint of the day, from 'Lives of the Saints'. By the time Sonechka was eight she knew the lives of most of the important Russian Orthodox saints and their respective feast days.

The family followed the Russian Orthodox tradition of naming the newborn child after the saint of the day. Though Sonechka was born on 1 October, her mother decided to call her Sofia, despite St Sofia's feast day falling on September 30. Of the several diminutives of Sofia available, the family thought Sonechka the most appropriate. Birthdays were not celebrated in Imperial Russia. Instead, Name Days, the saints' feast days, were observed.

With their extended family there were many Name Day celebrations throughout the year. On these occasions Lev made a great fuss of the person's special day. Glasha baked the traditional family *krendel* (a rich yeast cake mixture made with eggs, milk, honey, raisins and nuts). She also cooked a favourite dish for dinner. If the Name Day fell during the Great Lent², the fifty-day period before the Orthodox Church Easter, they went without the scrumptious *krendel*. Dairy products, meat and eggs were forbidden during Lent.

Despite the solemnity of Passion Week, the household took on a festive mood. On the Monday Glasha and her helpers began spring cleaning not only the house, but also all the outer buildings. This ended on Wednesday. On Thursday, known as *Velikii Chetverg* (Holy Thursday), Glasha with her troupe of household retainers went to the local *banya* (a type of Turkish bathhouse).

That night the household attended the local village church for the Holy Thursday service, where there were readings from the twelve gospels.

Sonechka did not attend this service until aged eight when, together with the family and other worshippers, she stood solemnly holding a lighted candle, listening to the readings. As instructed, she held her candle as upright as she could to prevent the candle wax dripping on the floor. She felt very grown up. At the end of the long service her mama placed her lighted candle in a glass lantern so that she could carry it home without the flame being extinguished by the wind. The long procession of worshippers wending their way with their sacred lights could be seen from afar.

On arriving home, her papa raised his lighted candle above their main doorway and made the sign of the cross. This left a blackened cross which symbolised God's protection over the household during the coming year. The children did the same above their bedroom doorways. Sonechka recalled, with pride, how she managed, with her papa's help, to do her first doorway cross.

When they returned home, Glasha's food preparations for *Paskha* began in earnest. The specially milled flour, eggs and butter had been delivered that morning. With the raisins weighed and the almonds chopped, Glasha called on the Lord's help before preparing the yeast dough. Turning to the icon corner of the kitchen, she made the sign of the cross and murmured a prayer beseeching God to make this 'batch of *kulich*' the best ever. She proceeded to bake the *kulich* (a cylinder-shaped yeast bread containing candied fruit, almonds, and raisins) throughout the night and most of the next morning.

The memory of waking to the delicious smell of freshly baked *kulich* wafting through the house remained forever with my mother. She recalled running to the kitchen, first thing in the morning, to see the mass of newly baked *kulich* set out on the long table. In the afternoon she helped decorate the tops of the *kulich* with white frosting, finishing with *Khristos Voskres* (Christ is Risen) made from raisins. Each child was given a small *kulich*, which they placed in a basket with the decorated painted eggs ready to be taken to the church for the traditional blessing after the *Paskha* midnight service.

Sonechka recalled that Easter for another reason: Mishka accidentally set fire to Liza's dress during the *Paskha* midnight procession. The fifteen-year-old Liza, dressed in a lovely white frock made by Anastasia, was an attractive young woman with beautiful thick wavy hair reaching down to her waist. Holding lighted candles, the clergy, bearing icons, led the congregation in the procession around the outside of the church. Taking care not to stumble on the uneven footpath, Anastasia, Liza and Sonechka walked abreast, followed by Lev, Sasha and Mishka. The procession halted in front of the church's closed front door. On entering the church, Mishka tripped on the step. Suddenly,

Liza's hair and dress were alight. Lev's quick reaction to extinguish the flames with his overcoat saved the petrified Liza from being badly burned.

Each Easter Lev and Anastasia held the traditional 'open house' attended by both rich and poor dressed in their Sunday best. After the seven weeks of fasting, it was, for many, the highlight of their year. The Easter tables were awash with numerous meat dishes and many other delicacies, including the traditional *paskha* (curd cheese, eggs, sugar, cream, almonds and raisins).

Glasha was celebrated for her baking. Lev boasted that her *kulich* and *paskha* could well grace the Tsar's table.

The parish priests were the first visitors to arrive to bless the house and Easter fare. Then, from midday onwards, the guests arrived. Anastasia and Aunt Olya, seated by the silver samovar, plied everyone with food and drink, making it difficult not to overindulge. Glasha, dressed in her best *sarafan* (traditional Russian peasant smock), and in a new kerchief, given each Easter by Anastasia, bustled about beaming. Humiliated by her singed hair Liza decided to forgo the Easter Day festivities.

Years later she told Sonechka how she hated having to kiss all and sundry, especially the elderly men from the village with their dirty beards. The traditional Easter greeting is to say, '*Khristos Voskrese*' (Christ is Risen), and then to kiss each other three times on the cheeks. For some, these festivities meant eating and drinking for several days: sampling the hospitality of the different households in the parish. Such was the importance of the *kulich* and *paskha* that households vied with one another to have the tastiest.

Apart from the joyous celebration of Christ's resurrection, Easter heralded the onset of spring with its profusion of blossoms. It also meant that before long Sonechka could enjoy the summer school holidays, playing on their sun-drenched property, listening to her papa's stories, reading and being with the guests.

That Easter, worried that her mama spent so much time in her bedroom during the afternoons, Sonechka expressed her concern to Glasha. Stroking Sonechka's head gently, Glasha whispered, 'Your *mamochka* is tired. Don't worry my little one, resting will, I'm sure, help her.'

CHAPTER TWO

With Anastasia's health continuing to deteriorate, that spring, Lev decided to employ a housekeeper to take over her duties. He chose Lydia Vladimirovna, a widow from Yalta, to fill this role. Her husband, a merchant, who had been much older than her, had died after twelve years of marriage, leaving her comfortably off. She seemed to enjoy the hustle and bustle of the household and maintained that it was a 'blessing' for her. From early on, Liza disliked her, as did Glasha, who would murmur under her breath, 'I've got to keep a watchful eye on this imperious *barinya's* (madam's) movements.'

That summer, 1913, Lev and Anastasia were delighted to receive an invitation from Alexander Pavlovich Balk to be his guests for the St Petersburg winter season. He was one of Lev's distinguished relations (Governor of St Petersburg at the time of the February 1917 revolution). Liza, who was just sixteen, accompanied them. Throughout that year there were numerous nationwide festivities celebrating the tercentenary of the House of Romanov. Anastasia and Liza pored over ladies' fashion journals, some from Paris, to get the latest mode. Anastasia got a renowned local seamstress to sew the outfits they would wear to the various functions in the imperial capital.

Early one autumn morning they set off for Yalta in a horse-drawn carriage which took them to Simferopol, where they boarded the train for Moscow. They spent two days in Moscow before catching another train for St Petersburg. This was a great adventure for Liza who had never ventured beyond the Tauride coast. Sonechka envied her. Unbeknown to Sonechka, her parents had another reason for going to the imperial capital. They were very concerned above Anastasia's deteriorating health. Lev wanted the best doctors in Russia to assess his wife's condition.

In Lev's absence, Aunt Olya and Lydia took charge of the household, and of Mishka and Sonechka. Mishka was about to start his second year at the local *gimnasia* (a high school preparing students for university) where, several months earlier, Liza had completed her studies with distinction. Sonechka

was enjoying her primary school. Sasha had completed his first year at the Art Academy.

That October, just after her birthday, Sonechka came down with the mumps. The doctor confined her to bed, all alone, in a semi-darkened room. Sonechka missed the fun-loving Mishka and her mother's care. She devoured the letters from St Petersburg describing Liza's successful entry into the famed *beau monde*. Aunt Olya relived her youthful golden years through these letters, with their fascinating accounts of the wondrous world of imperial St Petersburg. She maintained that her St Petersburg coming-out ball was the finest of that season, during which, for weeks on end, she waltzed the evenings away with many gallant young suitors.

After the Romanov celebrations the New Year seemed full of promise for Russia, especially during the early summer of 1914. Nobody was aware that a terrible war was about to break out that would lead to revolution and civil war and would destroy virtually everything they held dear.

The family was consumed with concern about Anastasia, as the St Petersburg doctors had diagnosed her heart condition. Despite the medicines they prescribed, her shortness of breath and fatigue increased to such an extent that she and Lev came home in mid-January. Liza remained in St Petersburg.

On her return, Anastasia's condition got so bad that she spent most of the day confined to her bedroom. With the warmer weather, Lev moved her divan onto the veranda in the hope that the fresh air would help her.

After school Sonechka would rush home to be with Anastasia, who cherished these precious times with her youngest child. She dismissed any suggestion that they might be hastening her decline. Besides helping Sonechka with her schoolwork, she read to her from her favourite books and poets' works. She taught Sonechka to accept life's trials and tribulations as being God's will. Reflecting on her mother's ordeal, some years later, Sonechka had no doubt that her faith in God enabled her to bear her suffering with fortitude. As her darling *mamochka* grew weaker, a sad veil fell over the household. Anastasia spent hours in prayer and discussions with the family priest, Father Arseny, often with Lev in attendance. Occasionally Sonechka and Mishka joined in these prayers, which gave her mama great solace.

Liza returned from St Petersburg for Easter and, two months later, Sasha came home.

By mid-summer 1914 it seemed that the whole world was about to explode. It began with the assassination in Sarajevo of Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne. Austria-Hungary subsequently

declared war on Serbia, with Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm threatening war on everyone. In response, Tsar Nicholas II ordered the mobilisation of more than a million men. In the evenings, Lev read the latest news. Fervent discussions followed as to what Russia should or should not do. The adults hoped it would all be resolved peaceably and that Sasha would not have to go to war.

The hot-headed Mishka told Sonechka in confidence that, should war break out, he would run away and join up despite being well under age. With his mates, he staged mock battles down near the pond. By August the war had started. Anti-German feeling became intense. This hostility had built up for quite some time, and the capital was renamed Petrograd. The overwhelming defeat in late August of the Imperial Russian army at the battle of Tannenberg in East Prussia dispelled the generally held belief that Russia would be victorious by Christmas. Some historians think that this offensive saved Paris. Tens of thousands died with many more wounded and taken prisoner. Only belatedly did the Russians learn that their massive army was poorly equipped, inadequately clothed and made up mainly of untrained peasants, many mere boys, led by officers of whom only a small proportion were well trained.

Three days after Sonechka's tenth birthday her mother, Anastasia, passed away in her sleep. She was only thirty-eight years old.

Straightaway, Lydia took charge. She had the mirrors shrouded and ornaments put away. The seamstress was summoned to sew the mourning shroud for Anastasia and to ensure the family wore the appropriate attire. For two days before the funeral Anastasia's body was laid out in the dining room surrounded by family icons and lighted candles. Relatives and friends came, some from afar, to pay their respects. Most stayed on for the funeral. Lev, no longer the jovial host, was in deep mourning. When not with the mourners, he spent long periods alone in the library.

As the grief-stricken household prepared for the funeral an oppressive cloud descended upon the once happy home. Sonechka tried to comprehend why *Bozhenka* (a diminutive for God) had taken her *mamochka* away from her. During this time Sasha, tenderly holding Sonechka's hand, took her for a walk along the path of cypress trees at the back of their home. He explained how, on the day of the funeral, the angels would take their *mamochka's* soul to heaven where she would no longer suffer. He told Sonechka that before Anastasia died she made him promise to look after his little sister no matter what.

The night before the funeral Anastasia's coffin was taken to the church where the *Parastas* (a vigil service for the dead) was conducted. During the night nuns read from the Psalter (Book of Psalms) over the body until the

funeral the next day. Family and friends attended the liturgy, followed immediately by the funeral service.

During these services Sonechka stood alongside the open coffin unable to take her eyes off the alabaster-like features of her mother's face. The intense smell of the incense mingled with the fragrant aroma of the mass of white flowers, mainly roses, covering the coffin, pervaded the church. Later, as the haunting funeral chant of *Vechnaya Pamyat* (Eternal Memory) accompanied the coffin to its final destination, Sonechka watched her distraught *papochka* bend down to kiss Anastasia's forehead for the last time. She was broken-hearted.

CHAPTER THREE

That winter an empty sadness pervaded the household. The loss of Anastasia affected everyone. In December, during Advent, Aunt Olya caught a chill that developed into pneumonia. When she died, Lydia became the new mistress of the samovar. With mounting resentment, Liza felt that, as the eldest daughter of the household, she should occupy this privileged position. Never before had my mother sensed such discord in the home.

Sasha left the Art Academy to join the army. By Christmas he was fighting somewhere in Poland.

Sonechka missed her *mamochka* desperately. Glasha was her sole confidante. Sharing her sorrow, Glasha would put her to bed and hear her prayers. Often, she curled up and fell asleep beside Sonechka. When Lydia found out about this she complained to Lev, who forbade Glasha to sleep in Sonechka's bed.

At the start of the 1915 summer only a few guests came to stay. Lydia, who was, by now, in complete charge, had Lev advertise for guests. One of them, Grigory Ippolitovich, boasted that he had spent time in prison for distributing pamphlets in Petrograd agitating for the overthrow of the Tsar. Tall, moustached and bespectacled, he claimed to be a distant relation of Lydia's. She endearingly called him Grisha, a diminutive of Grigory. Glasha hated him, maintaining that he was a German spy. As the news from the front got worse, Lev vehemently disagreed with Grigory's contention that defeat should be welcomed since it would allow Russia to become a socialist utopia.

Each morning at school Sonechka sang with great gusto the national anthem, 'God Save the Tsar'.

In Alushta, as elsewhere throughout the country, numerous fundraising bazaars and tea dances were held. Lev helped stage theatrical productions in Alushta to raise money for Mother Russia. Liza joined the war effort with her friends by attending first aid lectures at the local *lazaret* (infirmery) where among other tasks they wound bandages and knitted scarves for Russia's fighting sons. In addition, she learned how to use the typewriter. Everyone helped

in their own way. Though he still mourned Anastasia, Lev gradually became his old self with a twinkle in his eye.

The defeat suffered at Brest-Litovsk in August 1915 stunned them all. It was one of many disastrous defeats at the hands of the Germans, who proceeded to conquer a large part of Russia's western empire. When Lev read out the accounts of the battles Sonechka and Mishka pinpointed them on a large wall map they had drawn. After the Brest-Litovsk battle the Tsar proclaimed, 'We must fight on till victory crowns our glory.' Soon afterwards he took personal charge of the army. Later, pictures in the newspapers showed the young Tsarevich, the heir to the throne, visiting the front with his father. Several of Mishka's older playmates were called up, further heightening his fervent desire to go to war. Lev vowed that if Mishka ran away he personally would find him and give him such a thrashing he wouldn't be good for anything.

Christmas that year was celebrated quietly with just a few neighbours. Liza and her friend Dasha organised an evening performance re-enacting Krylov's animal fables. Each chose their favourite fable role to recite. The costumes took several days to create. Dressed as a grasshopper, Sonechka recited the fable *Strekoza i Muravei* (*The Dragonfly and the Ant*). Even with Lev and Mishka's help, the designing and making of the wings took many hours. This pleasurable diversion in a world that seemed determined to destroy itself lifted everyone's spirits.

During this time they received a letter from Sasha. He was in a *lazaret*, somewhere on the Ukrainian front, making a good recovery from shrapnel wounds in his shoulder. They thanked God that he had not been killed or seriously wounded. They knew few families were unaffected by the war, with many having tragic stories to tell.

It infuriated Liza to hear Lydia address her papa as Levchik (another affectionate diminutive of Lev), and for him to call her Lydochka. Sonechka assumed that this was one of the reasons why Liza spent most evenings with friends in town. During the day Liza practised at home on the typewriter that Lev had given her for Christmas. Sonechka was amazed how quickly her fingers tapped away on the shiny metal keys. She would not let anyone touch her precious possession.

Once when Sonechka tried to use it, the keys got stuck and her fingers became blackened trying to free them up. Fully expecting Liza to accuse her of damaging her machine, she was greatly relieved when she made no mention of this matter. Liza's first job using her new skill was at the town hall, where she recorded the particulars of soldiers missing at the front.

By now Mishka was in his final year at the *gimnasia*. Though he wanted to be an engineer, he was still determined to join the army and fight the Germans. In mid-June 1916 jubilation greeted the news that General Alexei Brusilov had won a series of spectacular victories against the Austrians. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners were taken. There had been no word from Sasha for several months. Fearful he might have been killed, Liza tried desperately to find out at work what had happened to him. Nothing came of her inquiries.

That summer the same summer guests duly arrived. Grigory Ippolitovich had recently grown a goatee beard. Lev thought it made him a comic rather than a dignified figure, especially when he got worked up trying to convince him that only a radical socialist government could save Russia.

Early one morning Lev asked Liza, Sonechka and Mishka to meet him in the dining room. He came straight to the point, announcing that he and Lydia had made a most important decision. While Liza stood glaring at him he put an affectionate hand on Sonechka's shoulder and gently said, 'In these trying times, my little darling, you need motherly affection and guidance.' Liza let out an anguished cry and shot out of the room. She left so suddenly that Lydia, who must have been listening at the door, stumbled into the room. Bewildered, they all stared at one another. Lev, taking Lydia's hand in his, kissed it and ushered her onto the veranda.

That evening there was a celebratory dinner in honour of the betrothed couple. Wine and vodka flowed. Numerous speeches were given and toasts made. Liza was absent throughout. Later Sonechka learned that, after staying overnight with her friend Dasha, Liza went to live with their mother's sister, Aunt Frosya, and her husband, Fyodor, in Simferopol.

Dreading what Lydia might do, Sonechka hoped, up to the last moment, that the wedding would be cancelled. It was not to be. The marriage duly took place at the same church where her mama's funeral service had been held – a poignant reminder of how much she missed her. In fact, the only notable change in the household was that Grigory became part of the family, rather than a long-staying guest.

Sonechka noticed that her papa returned to being his familiar jovial self during Grigory's frequent absences. All the while she sensed her mama's presence. Oh, how she missed her.

For some time rumours had abounded concerning the evil influence said to be exerted on the royal family by Rasputin, the Siberian peasant mystic.

Though it was believed that only Rasputin could alleviate the Tsarevich's

haemophilia, his assassination by several eminent courtiers, led by Prince Yusupov, was greeted with widespread relief. Many believed that his long-standing hold over the Tsarina, the Tsar and the court had left the country leaderless, with catastrophic consequences. This failure applied particularly to the war against Germany, Austro-Hungary and Turkey, in which more than six million Russian soldiers had been killed or wounded. To make matters even worse, by early 1917, there were critical shortages of most necessities in much of the country, with hunger fuelling widespread protests and strikes.

Though quite well informed about events in Russia during this period, most people still found it unbelievable when their revered 'little father', the Tsar of all Russia, was forced to abdicate in early March 1917 by alienated aristocrats, courtiers and generals. This humiliation took place at an obscure rail siding far from Petrograd in a temperature of minus 35 degrees. He named his brother, the Grand Duke Mikhail, to succeed him, but Mikhail refused to accept the role.

On his return to Petrograd, the Tsar and his family were placed under house arrest.

On the battlefronts, officers tried in vain to lead their poorly equipped and dispirited men, most of whom had fought continuously for three years. They were worn out like the rags that bound their feet. Incited by Russian revolutionaries, all they wanted was to go home. Meanwhile, in April the Germans spirited the Bolshevik leader, Lenin, back to Russia by rail in a sealed carriage from Switzerland. The Germans counted on Lenin, who had been living in exile, latterly in Switzerland, to foment a revolution that would take Russia out of the war.

Lev detested Lenin. He saw him as a zealot steeped in the works of Russian anarchists, European revolutionaries and philosophers, and especially the German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. It mystified Lev how so many privileged Russians found it 'fashionable' to support Lenin, since they themselves were his sworn enemy, the bourgeoisie, whom he had vowed to exterminate.

From now on politics dominated the home. Besides attending frequent political meetings in a nearby hall, Lydia and Grigory harangued everyone about the urgent need for a socialist Russia. They maintained that massive numbers of Russian soldiers had discarded their weapons and fled the battlefronts. They were ecstatic when Prince Lvov, the head of the Provisional Government, resigned but disgusted when another democrat, Alexander Kerensky, replaced him as prime minister. When they heard that their hero,

Lenin, had disappeared and his close colleague, Trotsky, had been arrested, they fell silent.

That summer Sonechka loved lying on an old cane divan in the garden, hidden from view by an umbrella of wisteria. Here she day-dreamed to her heart's content. In a household of adults who had little time for an over-imaginative twelve-year-old, reading became her all-consuming passion. Furthermore, it allowed her to escape the turmoil threatening to engulf them. Romantic fantasies filled her mind, fuelled by devouring such classics as Pushkin's great verse novel, *Yevgeny Onegin*. She shed tears of sympathy for the heartbroken Tatyana's unrequited love for the heartless Onegin. The characters in Sir Walter Scott's books came to life for her. She dreamt of living in a castle in the rugged, sparsely populated Highlands.

One day in late August, as Sonechka looked down their long, steep driveway, she saw a familiar figure labouring his way up towards her. It was Sasha. After weeks of walking, and jumping trains, he had finally come home. Lev couldn't believe his eyes. His firstborn had been spared and was back in the family fold. Many changes had taken place since he had left three years ago.

Sasha, who by then was an officer, had fled the front due to the wrath of his soldiers, fired up by Bolshevik propaganda. In normal times he would have been considered a deserter.

In the evenings Lev continued his newspaper readings, often with the whole household listening in stunned silence. It seemed that not a day passed without news of their beloved Russia collapsing in chaos. The stablehand's grandson had recently been killed, as had two of Mishka's friends. They wondered how it would all end. With hindsight, Sonechka had no doubt that these daily readings, with their ominous news, took their toll on her poor papa, who began to complain of severe chest pains. He was advised by the doctor to have peace and quiet. Grigory, who took it upon himself to read out the daily news in place of Lev, infuriated Sasha by proclaiming his radical socialist politics. Consequently, these readings ceased.

At the end of September, Kerensky announced that for their own protection, the Tsar and his family had been taken under guard to somewhere in Siberia. Meanwhile, the Germans were advancing on all fronts.

In early October, after a year's absence, Liza returned home. During her stay Lev regained some of his old vitality. Though happy to be reunited, foreboding continued to dominate their discussions concerning what the future might hold. Liza announced her intention to marry Pavel Konstantinovich, a friend of the family's whom she had got to know while living in Simferopol.

He was a forty-year-old widower with a grown family, who owned Alma, a large orchard estate near the river Alma. Lev, of course, wanted to meet his prospective son-in-law before giving his blessing. Mishka had completed his *gimmasia* education and was about to enter the engineering department of the Commercial School. Determined to make his own way in the world, an intense restlessness had replaced his youthful exuberance.

CHAPTER FOUR

October 25, 1917, was a momentous turning point for Russia. On this day, the newspapers, including the *Krymsky Vestnik* (Crimean Messenger), reported that a relatively small handful of Bolsheviks led by Lenin had overthrown Kerensky's multi-party Provisional Government when they occupied the Winter Palace. Soon after, the Bolsheviks abolished the democratically elected Constitutional Assembly and declared war on all other political parties. This persecution was enforced by Lenin's secret police, the dreaded Cheka³ (forerunner of the KGB). The Bolshevik slogan 'Peace, Bread, Land and All Power to the Soviets', though a dreadful lie, proved to be powerful propaganda that mesmerised many.

In no time, Lenin instigated peace talks with Germany. Lev and Sasha were appalled that millions of Russians had laid down their lives defending their country against the Germans only for it to be torn apart within by a far greater enemy, the Bolsheviks. A Volunteer Army, created in the Don Cossack region in southern Russia, which evolved into the White Army, proved to be the only effective opposition to the Bolsheviks. This anti-Bolshevik force was made up of men drawn from every section of society and political persuasion. The fiercely proud Cossacks, who had defended Imperial Russia's southern borders since Catherine the Great's reign, constituted the other half of the White Army. These Cossacks realised that the Bolsheviks would abolish their treasured freedoms, including the ownership of the land that they farmed, making them serfs once again in all but name.

Both my mother's brothers joined the Volunteer Army in the Don Cossack region. On the day of their departure the whole household bowed their heads in prayer as Lev blessed each of his sons with the icons of St George and St Nicholas. Sonechka was terrified she might never see Sasha and Mishka again. With tear-filled eyes, she bid them farewell. For Mishka, war was a game. The battle-weary Sasha knew it to be brutal, but necessary to preserve their way of life.

The ranks of the White Army rapidly swelled, rising to a peak of well over 100,000 men, with units fighting in most parts of the country. Lev dolefully mused that Imperial Russia had fallen, 'like an old tree falls, rotted at heart by weather and time'. He had nightmares concerning the fate of his sons.

Her father often spoke of how much he missed Anastasia and conceded that he had wronged Sonechka by remarrying. He thought that Lydia's close relationship with Grigory belied her contention that she was not a revolutionary. It was about that time that Sonechka noticed that Lydia had moved out of Lev's bedroom into a room at the other end of the house near Grigory.

In the evenings, after Lev had checked Sonechka's homework, they discussed articles in the newspapers. It worried Lev that the fanatical and single-minded Bolsheviks controlled both Moscow and Petrograd, the heart of the country. In contrast, the thin lines of communication of the disparate White Army were spread across the length and breadth of the enormous Russian empire – one sixth of the world's landmass – making co-ordination of its individual units virtually impossible. The token support given to the White Army by some dozen nations, including Britain, France, America and Japan, proved disastrous for the anti-Bolshevik cause. It meant that many persons, who would otherwise not have supported the Bolsheviks, fought for them against the White Army in defence of their Motherland.

Rumour ruled supreme. Concerned with what might become of Sonechka should anything happen to him, Lev showed her the deeds to the house, railroad share certificates and papers to do with money and valuables held in the bank. In the library he had hidden a small quantity of gold. He explained that should inflation make money worthless these valuables could be used as barter for food and essentials. It upset her to hear him speak in this way.

On February 10, 1918, Lenin signed the infamous Brest-Litovsk Treaty, which ceded a third of European Russia, including the Crimea, to Germany. Though incensed to be under the heel of the Germans without a fight, Lev conceded that they had restored law and order. To Lev and Sonechka's horror, they heard in August that the Bolsheviks had murdered the Tsar and his family in a cellar in Yekaterinburg. Lev saw this heinous crime as the final nail in Imperial Russia's coffin. He regretted that the Jewish sisters Fanny and Dora Kaplan had merely wounded Lenin in their recent assassination attempt. The diabolical Bolsheviks used this incident to justify their edict of mass terror, which led to the death of millions.

On returning from school one day Sonechka went into her father's room. Not wanting to disturb him she tiptoed towards the bed. Standing by his side,

she sensed a deathly silence had replaced her father's gentle snore. Was her darling papa dead? In disbelief she kept caressing his lifeless hand. Finally convinced, she tenderly kissed his brow and knelt to pray for his departed soul.

Some time later Glasha found her there, motionless and drained of all emotion.

Sonechka's only solace was that both her papa and mama would now be reunited in heaven.

Lydia insisted on burying Lev quickly, without the traditional three days of mourning and the reading of prayers for the dead. Religion was a foolish bourgeois fantasy, she insisted. However, unbeknown to her, Glasha and Sonechka took turns that night reading the Psalter. The funeral service took place in such haste that relatives and friends, including Liza, who did not live nearby were unable to attend.

As when her mother died a profound sense of loss overwhelmed Sonechka. She had cried herself to sleep for weeks on end. Now there were no tears, only a feeling of emptiness.

Sonechka knew that her life had changed forever – she was a thirteen-year-old orphan, adrift in a disintegrating world.

After the funeral, to Sonechka's dismay, Lydia told her that she alone would deal with Lev's estate. The next day, when Sonechka returned home from the *gimnasia*, chaos confronted her. The contents of drawers and cupboards littered the floors the furniture was in disarray and the beds were stripped. Shocked, she rushed through to the kitchen hoping to find Glasha, all the while calling out her name. She then ran out into the backyard and called out for old Semyon, the handyman/gardener. From the far end of the yard she heard muffled cries coming from the garden storeroom. She unbolted the door and found Glasha and Semyon tied together back-to-back, tethered to a pillar. With difficulty she freed them both and removed their blindfolds. Semyon's battered face and Glasha's blood-clotted hair appalled her. She could not imagine how anyone could have been so brutal to these two elderly retainers.

It took several hours for Glasha and Semyon to come to their senses. Soon after Sonechka had left for school that morning, Grigory had arrived unexpectedly in a horse-drawn wagon at the back of the house. Wielding a revolver, he confronted Semyon in the backyard and proceeded to pistol-whip him. Hearing the old man scream, Glasha rushed to his aid, whereupon, she was felled by a blow to the head. Grigory and Lydia then dragged them both into the storeroom and trussed them up. They took virtually everything of

value, including the property and bank papers that Sonechka had been shown by Lev. Even the jewellery bequeathed to her by her mama disappeared.

Semyon recovered quickly from his ordeal. Glasha, however, was far from her normal spirited self. For long periods, she sat in the icon corner of the kitchen, under the *lampada*, bemoaning their lot and beseeching the Holy Mother of God for help. There was no word from Liza. It became obvious to Sonechka that Lydia had not told Liza of Lev's death. In her distressed state, Glasha was unable to help Sonechka.

Several days later, an amiable looking middle-aged man with a prominent moustache, whom Sonechka did not recognise, arrived at their home. With a warm smile, he grasped her hand and introduced himself as Pavel Konstantinovich, Liza's betrothed. He explained that he was in Alushta on business and had taken the opportunity to visit them. He was shocked that Lev had died and that Lydia had stripped the house. Concerned for Sonechka and Glasha's safety, he offered to take them to Aunt Frosya's in Simferopol, where Liza was living. For Sonechka, the prospect of a sanctuary in Simferopol helped offset her sadness at leaving her home.

The Mother of God had answered their prayers.

Though she missed the lush Tauride coastal vegetation, the rugged mountain pass with its majestic waterfalls and sheer cliff faces was awe-inspiring. Pavel told her stories about this part of the Crimea.

When they arrived in Simferopol, the capital of the Crimea, they saw many more German soldiers than on the Tauride coast. Pavel reassured them that, in accordance with the terms of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, the German occupation forces were generally well behaved.

Several damaged buildings caught their eye. Silhouetted by the setting sun, they saw a Russian Orthodox Church. Its windows were smashed. Its door lay battered on the ground. Its broken crosses dangled from the damaged cupolas. Glasha and Sonechka were horrified to see this sacred house of God so defiled. Pavel explained that it had been one of the first buildings attacked by revolutionaries when Lenin seized power. The priests were beaten and dragged out of the church and denounced as 'enemies of the people'. Pavel did not know their fate.

Aunt Frosya's home was on the outskirts of the city, set back from the road in a mature garden with a barn at the back of the property. The longstanding friends, Pavel and Fyodor Nikolayevich, greeted one another heartily.

A grain merchant, Fyodor had married Frosya, Anastasia's sister. They had no children. Fyodor's two daughters from a previous marriage were both

married. Whereas Frosya welcomed them, Fyodor was aloof, making it clear from early on, that they were a burden he could well do without. However, he tolerated Liza, no doubt because she was marrying Pavel and she brought home food given as payment for her secretarial job. Sonechka kept out of Fyodor's way as best she could. Thankfully, Glasha got on well with Frosya. They spent many hours together in the kitchen reminiscing about the good old days in Alushta, where Glasha had first come to work for the family as a fourteen-year-old, forty years ago. Unfortunately, it was a different story between Liza and Sonechka. To Liza, Sonechka remained a child. She mocked her at the slightest pretext and had Sonechka forever at her beck and call. To make matters worse they shared a bedroom. Mercifully, Liza spent most evenings with friends in town.

At the local *gimnasia* Sonechka met Rachel, a Jewish girl, who became her best friend. They shared a passion for the theatre, especially, the new craze of moving pictures. They would sit in a darkened hall, their eyes riveted to a rapid sequence of pictures projected onto a large screen portraying a melodramatic story with the piano providing the appropriate musical accompaniment. Girls with their boyfriends sat towards the back. Sonechka and Rachel made a point of sitting near the front, behind Sergei, the good-looking young pianist, whose deft touch enhanced the story's crises and emotional moments. Sighing and crying, they saw *Camille*, based on Alexandre Dumas' novel *The Lady of the Camellias*, several times. Just before the end, not wanting Sergei to see their tear-streaked cheeks and swollen eyes, they would tiptoe out of the hall. They then rushed to Rachel's home to reread the tragic parts in the story, taking turns playing the finale, the heart-breaking, couch-death scene.

Rachel's family lived above her father's jewellery shop. They were Karaites who traced their ancestry way back to the time when the Crimea was part of the mighty Byzantine Empire. Both sides of Sonechka's family came to the Crimea from northern Germany during the eighteenth century. Their families were just two of the many different peoples that made up the exotic Crimean ethnic mix. Rachel's family, who were religious Jews, invited Sonechka for a meal. The welcoming glow of the candles, and the togetherness, brought back poignant memories of her family in Alushta when her mama was alive.

In late October the family received a letter from Sasha, from whom they had not heard since he left home with Mishka to join the Volunteer Army. He was fighting the Bolsheviks somewhere in the depths of Siberia. Sonechka thanked God that Sasha, her guardian, was alive and prayed that

he would survive. However, her heart ached for her childhood playmate, Mishka. Sasha wrote that he had lost contact with him. Knowing Mishka as she did, Sonechka kept reassuring herself that, being resourceful, he too would be alive. Sonechka never learned his fate.

With the defeat of Germany in the World War, and the departure of their occupation forces by the end of 1918, the Crimea erupted in violent conflict. Until April 1919 the Crimean civil government, headed by the Karaite Jew Solomon Krym, tried but failed to restore peace and prosperity.

The once-abundant market stalls were empty. Hyperinflation made money worthless. Marauding gangs demanded food, clothing and valuables from the population, killing those who resisted them. These gangs included anti-Bolsheviks, ranging from monarchists to anarchists; Bolshevik supporters, known as Reds; local peasant guerrillas, known as Greens; Ukrainian nationalists and Crimean Tartars. People behaved like animals with no clear-cut battle lines.

During this turmoil, lasting some sixteen months, the part of the Crimea Sonechka was in endured some fourteen different changes of rule. Irrespective of their ideology, gangs targeted Jewish shops and premises. Sonechka was devastated to learn that one such gang had raided Rachel's father's shop. It was rumoured that the survivors had been rounded up and taken to the outskirts of the city and shot. Since Sonechka lost contact with Rachel she assumed that these monsters had murdered her.

Lenin issued a nationwide directive requisitioning food for the starving cities; this was where his bedrock of support, the industrial proletariat, lived. This had dire consequences. The Cheka ripped up floors and tore down walls in their search for hidden stores of food and valuables.

His savings worthless, Fyodor's hope of a secure and peaceful future had evaporated. Now his very survival was threatened. As a grain merchant he knew that it was inevitable his property would continue to be targeted, not just by the Cheka, but also by the marauding gangs. Furthermore, the Cheka had recently forcibly requisitioned the grain, food and valuables (vital for bartering), that he had stored in his barn. He was aware that unless he could hide his few remaining valuables, his household would starve. So he desperately sought a secure hiding place.

Late one evening Fyodor aired these concerns to Sonechka. Taken aback that he should unburden his fears to her of all people, she set about finding a hiding place. She prayed for a place where the Cheka would be unlikely to search. Miraculously, her mind cleared and she saw that the answer lay right before them, in the kitchen. Pointing to the large cast-iron stove she

exclaimed, 'I've got it! If we remove the bricks from one side of the stove we can dig a hole large enough to store the valuables and dispose of the soil in the cesspit.'

Though sceptical, and knowing they would be shot if the Cheka discovered their hiding place, Fyodor conceded that it was probably their only chance of survival. Glasha and Frosya agreed. Loathe to soil her hands, Liza did little. With their lives at stake, they toiled furiously throughout the next two nights. Having removed the bricks on one side of the range, they then dug a hole underneath it. The family marvelled how my mother, a mere slip of a girl, had provided them with this unexpected lifeline.

CHAPTER FIVE

The next week, as Sonechka made her way to school, a revolver-wielding militiaman, dressed in a Tolstoy-type peasant blouse under his unbuttoned black leather coat, confronted her. He wore an ill-fitting cap bearing a red star. Screaming in broken, heavily accented Russian, he accused her of carrying a weapon. When he found nothing, she assumed he would let her go. Instead, he thrust the revolver into the small of her back and forced her to walk ahead of him. Terrified, she imagined being raped, tortured and killed by this young savage.

After they had walked a short distance, he shrieked at her to stop in front of an impressive two-storeyed house on the outskirts of the city. He unlocked the front door and ordered her into a spacious marble foyer and along a wide, panelled corridor to the right of the staircase, all the while jabbing the revolver into the small of her back. He then knocked on a door, marked 'Commissar', and shouted in a language she did not understand. A similarly dressed, rugged-looking man opened the door and growled at her to come in. No longer conscious of the pressure of the revolver, she glanced back and saw that the militiaman had gone.

Sonechka stood petrified in the middle of the room, with the commissar glowering at her. Her mind raced, trying to imagine what he wanted from her. Suddenly, he bellowed, 'The White vermin and their filthy supporters have fled. I am the commissar of this area's All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage.' His verbose job title confused her. He proceeded to berate her for not knowing the official title of the Cheka, accusing her of being a hated bourgeois. Smirking, he said, 'Don't look so worried, I'm not going to kill you, at least not yet. You're going to work for me. I need a pretty young assistant. Comrade Stalin, the Party's Commissar for Nationalities, insists that we record everything we do. You'll start here tomorrow morning, sharp at 7 o'clock.'

When she tried to explain that she had not done this sort of work before,

and that she was still at school, he sniggered and retorted, 'You've had a good education, I bet. That's just what I need, someone who can read and type and do addition.' Then, grabbing her hand, he exclaimed, 'Ah, just as I thought! The smooth skin proves that you've never toiled long and hard on the land or in a factory. People like you deserve to die! Mark my word, you'll learn quickly enough what you have to do.'

Mortified, she raced back home to tell Glasha and Frosya what had happened. Though they consoled her as best they could she could not sleep that night, haunted by nightmares of the commissar trying to kill her. Spurred on by the commissar's dire threat should she fail to measure up to his expectations, Sonechka quickly became a proficient typist. She was helped by Frosya, who had taught herself to type when Fyodor's secretary disappeared during the Civil War. It was a forlorn attempt to keep his business going.

On Sonechka's first morning the commissar dictated several short reports. She then filed a large pile of death certificates into their respective folders. In the afternoon he had her report for work in the courtyard. She was sickened by the sight that confronted her – several vehicles were piled high with dead bodies collected daily from the streets. Many, often whole families, had starved to death. Mixed with these were the bodies of those executed by the Cheka.

The driver ordered Sonechka to get into the vehicle beside him. As she sat down he leered at her and said, 'I can see that my pretty girl fancies a joyride.' The smell of his filthy clothes and foul breath made her want to vomit. He then started the vehicle, and once they were out on the road, he placed his hand on her thigh. Disgusted, she slid across the seat to the far side of the cab. She thought of jumping out of the vehicle, but knew that even if she did manage to get back to Fyodor's, they would hunt her down. Travelling to the outskirts of Simferopol and through the adjacent countryside, she saw cadaverous adults and children clothed in rags, wandering in search of food. Revulsion and pity consumed her.

Eventually, they stopped at the edge of a forest, where two men flung the bodies from the vehicle into a large shallow pit. She was commanded to count the numbers buried. Mechanically, she marked them down. By recording the thump of each new body as it was cast into the pit, she could keep count without having to watch too closely. This sound haunted her for evermore.

Later she learned that the Cheka forced prisoners to dig their own graves before shooting them. It was rumoured that some victims were not buried properly. Those that did not die dragged themselves out of their graves. Survivors joined partisan groups such as the Greens. She could see no end to this

spiral of death and destruction. It was a never-ending nightmare.

From the description Sonechka gave Fyodor of her Cheka tormentors, he thought they were poorly educated peasants whom the Bolsheviks had recruited from the ethnic minorities who had suffered under Tsarist rule. Consequently, the Cheka had to rely on literate and numerate women such as Sonechka to collate and record what they did. She now knew that Lenin meant to destroy everything Imperial Russia had stood for.

By chance, Sonechka overheard a conversation at the Cheka headquarters that sent a chill down her spine. She hurried home that evening to warn Fyodor that the Cheka would soon be searching their area.

Late one night the next week, five burly Chekists stormed into their house and, without saying a word, began to search it from top to bottom. Petrified, they watched as the Chekists tore up the floorboards, tore out wall panels and smashed furniture. The Chekists were livid that they had not found any valuables or substantial quantities of food hidden in this bourgeois merchant's property.

To the family's enormous relief, the Chekists did not look under the rug that covered the kitchen floor near the stove. Nor did they notice the two sacks of flour that Frosya had put near the door. The hole beside the stove was not large enough to hide them. Undeterred, Frosya had covered the two sacks with a cloth on which she placed a wooden board with a large container of fresh water and several mugs. Before the Chekists left she offered them a mug of water. One of them accepted. This 'watering hole' remained in place for some time.

The next morning the commissar, scowling, said to Sonechka, 'I understand that my men found nothing at your relatives' home last night.'

Taking a sudden interest in the report she had before her, Sonechka tried to ignore his comment. It was soon apparent that this was a prelude to a deeper line of questioning. Instead of going into his office, he turned and walked back in her direction. She pretended to concentrate on her work, but knew he was standing just in front of her. She carried on reading the report, but was forced to look up when he took hold of her hand. He turned his inquisitor's gaze on her. He showed no sign of emotion. Her heart pounded, she wanted to pull away but knew it to be futile. She felt his steely grip tighten. Then he began bending her ring finger backwards. 'Where have they hidden it?' he sneered. She gasped as pain shot up her arm. Through gritted teeth he grunted and hissed, 'We know that a bourgeois merchant like him must have valuables and food hidden away somewhere!'

As he leaned over her, his putrid breath filled the air. She felt sick. In a quavering voice, she blurted out, 'I don't know. I really don't know. I'm here most of the time.'

The commissar, infuriated by now, bent another of her fingers backwards. As he did so, he snarled, 'Don't take me for a fool, girl!'

Screaming and writhing in pain, she grabbed hold of the desk with her free hand to prevent herself falling to the floor.

'We'll find what you've hidden, if we have to search the house a hundred times!' he bellowed. 'And you know what will happen to you then. It would be far better for you to tell me what I want to know now!'

She kept on repeating, 'I don't know. I really don't know anything.'

'Have it your way then,' the commissar said, releasing her finger. He sneered and his face became hideously contorted.

Instinctively, in a bid to relieve the pain, she clasped her swollen hand to her chest.

'If you're lying I'll shoot you myself,' he muttered, before turning his back on her and storming back into his office.

Secretarial duties in the mornings and recording the burials in the afternoons became her daily work pattern. Night after night, bodies writhing in pits, pitiful cries for help and the mutilated bodies of her brothers, Sasha and Mishka, filled her *koshmary* (nightmares). Frequently, she woke up screaming.

Liza complained of being disturbed during the night so Sonechka moved into Glasha's room at the back of the house. The treasured family icons which Glasha had brought with them and managed to hide from the Chekists were a great solace to Sonechka as was Glasha's soothing presence.

The commissar taunted her like a cat playing with a cornered mouse.

One morning, he leered at her and said, 'I've decided that it would be a good idea for you to be my mistress. I want to get to know the bourgeoisie better. After all, you're by far our best customers.'

Sonechka was stunned.

'You know what I mean you bourgeois bitch,' the commissar screamed, his face flushed red with rage.

'You walk in here every day, you with your fine manners and speech, such a proper young lady, and then every night, out you walk again. There are plenty of your kind who come here and never leave. It's my decision whether you get to leave each night or remain here as an enemy of the people. You can't deny me.'

Terrified, she could not stop thinking of the Cheka interrogator she had

heard screaming at a prisoner, 'We're judge, jury and executioner, and everything is ours!'

Though the commissar's rage passed quickly, his lecherous advances sickened her. She vowed to thwart him, but how?

The next day, as Sonechka sat typing, there was a commotion outside her window. An overly plump woman brandishing a revolver was striding towards the entrance. She shouted in a raucous voice, 'Don't tell me what to do, you scumbag! Get out of my way.'

A Chekist burst into the office. He grabbed Sonechka and pushed her through the back door. He whispered in her ear, 'Shut up if you know what's good for you'.

As they crouched in the bushes under the commissar's window, Sonechka could hear the woman berating her husband.

'Where have you hidden her? My spies tell me she's a fresh little piece you've found to amuse yourself with. I know you've been with her the last two nights. I warn you, if I find her I'll shoot her.'

A shot rang out. Petrified, Sonechka realised that this foul-mouthed woman was speaking about her as if she were the commissar's mistress.

That evening Sonechka worked a later shift than usual. At 10 pm she was allowed home for an hour. While walking back to the Cheka headquarters, she stopped for several minutes to admire the star-studded heavens adorned by a beautiful crescent moon. Placing her hand on her gold christening cross under her blouse, she beseeched God and his Blessed Mother to save her from this hell on earth. Suddenly, on nearing her destination, she saw that the headquarters were in uproar. Several people were being dragged out of the building and bundled into two large vehicles whose lights shone directly at her. From inside came shouts and screams as more people were being dragged out. Frozen on the spot, she watched as a young man broke free from the bedlam and raced in her direction. As he came near, she recognised him as one of the Chekists. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, a shot rang out and he fell down at her feet, his lifeless eyes transfixing her. Praying she had not been seen, she threw herself behind a bush, out of the glare of the headlights. It was all over in a few more minutes. The vehicles sped off in the opposite direction, and all was silent again.

Uncertain whether any of the raiders had remained in the headquarters, Sonechka waited for what seemed an eternity before getting out from behind the bush. Then, once she had summed up the courage, she crept into the headquarters. Chaos confronted her. Office equipment, furniture, folders and

papers were strewn everywhere. In the cellar the guns and ammunition were gone and the prison cell doors stood wide open. In the courtyard she came across three bodies, two more Chekists and a man she did not recognise. Devastated, she slumped down into a chair and cried bitter tears of fear and revulsion. She shuddered to think what might have happened to her, for she knew that whoever these raiders were, had she not stopped to gaze at the night sky, she could have been raped, tortured and killed. In the eerie silence that followed, she whispered a prayer of thanks for her amazing deliverance.

The next day the Cheka headquarters remained abandoned.

Soon afterwards Liza and Pavel were married. Fyodor, Frosya, Glasha and Sonechka attended the brief civil ceremony. Standing in the ornately decorated hall with portraits of Marx and Lenin staring down at them, my mother could not help thinking about how much more beautiful and meaningful it would have been to have this ceremony held in their church in Alushta. A profound feeling of sadness overwhelmed her. Tears welled up in her eyes as she thought about how different all this would have been had her parents been alive. No doubt, Anastasia would have insisted on at least a priest blessing their union.