

Mikhail Sholokhov

THE CHAIRMAN OF THE REVOLUTIONARY SOVIET OF THE REPUBLIC

(Translated by Assya Humesky and David H. Stewart)

OUR REPUBLIC OF TOPCHANSKI was not 'specially huge—all in all about a hundred households located along Mucky Ravine forty-some-odd miles from the stanitsa.

But I want to tell you how we were transformed into a Republic: that spring I come home from Comrade Budenny's army and the citizens elected me chairman of the village because I'd got two Orders of the Red Banner for my valorous bravery against Wrangel, which Comrade Budenny personally hung on me and shook my hand very respectably.

So I took over the office and the whole village would've lived in peace like the rest of the nation, but an outfit of Whites turned up in our neighbourhood and started tearing the daylight out of our village. Sometimes they'd drive off the horses and leave just old decrepited nags, and sometimes they'd graze over the crops.

Now the folks in the villages around ours are just plain rotten; they took to showing hospitality to the Whites and feeding them. When I seen that in the neighbouring villages, I called out my village and says to the citizens: "Did you or didn't you make me chairman?"

"We did."

"Well then", says I, "in the name of all the proletariats in the village, I'm asking you to maintain your autonomy and to suspend all communions with the neighbouring villages, on account of they're 'anti's' and it's an awful disgrace to walk the same road with them. From now on this here village of ours ain't a village no more but a Republic; and I, seeing as how I was elected by you, appoint myself the Chairman of the Revolutionary Soviet of the Republic and declare a siege hereabouts."

Well, the politically ignorant ones kept shut up, but the Red Army men and young Cossacks said, "Fine! Agreed without voting!"

Then I commenced to make a speech to them: "Let us, comrades, give a hand to our Soviet government and let us engage ourselves in battle with the Whites to the last drop of blood, because it's a hydra, a beast that gnaws the very roots of the universal socialism!"

The elders, standing behind the crowd, at first tried to object, but I propagandized them with all the cuss words in the book and so everybody agreed that the Soviet government is our nursing mother and that we all have to categorically hang onto her skirt.

The meeting approved a petition to the stanitsa Executive Committee asking for rifles and shells and they decided to send me and the sekertary, Nikon, to the stanitsa with it.

Real early next day I harnessed my old mare and we started out. We made about six miles and just started down the hill into a valley when I looked and seen the dust whirling on the road ahead and under it five horsemen riding at us.

I felt sick to my stomach because I guessed that they were our bitter enemies from the White outfit.

We couldn't take the initiative, my sekertary and I, and who could? Just think: all around it the steppe and it's shamelessly bare, not a single bush, not a hole or even a small gully. So we stopped the mare right in the middle of the road.

We carried no weapons with us and were as harmless as bundled babes. I would have been plum stupid to run.

My sekertary got scared of the enemy and started feeling real bad. I seen he wanted to jump off the waggon and run, but where to? He didn't even know himself. So I told him: "Nikon," I says, "you better tuck in your tail and don't budge! I'm Chairman of the Revolutionary Soviet and you're my sekertary and that means we gotta meet death together!"

But on account of his political ignorance he jumped down off the waggon and went racing across the steppe so that it looked like even hunting dogs couldn't catch him; but the horsemen, seeing a suspicious citizen galloping across the steppe, spurred their horses and soon caught up with him near a little rise.

With dignity I got off the waggon, swallowed all the unsuitable papers and documents and began to wait for whatever would come next. Then I seen how after they talked to him for a minute they swarmed on him and began slashing him with their swords. He slumped to the ground, and they turned his pockets out,

hung around a little rummaging them, then got back on their horses and started for me.

I figured these fellows were no jokes; I should have got lost only there wasn't nothing I could do but wait. So they rode up to me; and their chief, Fomin by name, was in front with his shaggy red beard, his face covered with dust, his eyes glaring, and all of him looking fierce.

"So you're Bogatyrev, the Chairman?"

"I am."

"Did you get my message to leave the chairmanship?"

"Yes, I heard something to that effect."

"Well then, why didn't you leave it?"

And all the while he was asking me these lousy questions he didn't even show he was mad. I got desperate, because I figured that all this polite stuff wouldn't save my neck anyway, and so I answered him: "Because I stand firm on the platform of the Soviet government, and I observe all its programs down to the last detail and you categorically ain't going to push me off the platform!"

He swore at me real dirty and carefully laid me one over the head with his whip. My head swelled up to the size of a ripe cucumber like the kind women leave for seed.

I felt the bump with my fingers and said to him: "Your politically ignorant brutality is very unbecoming, but I personally went through the civil war and annihilated the likes of the Wrangels. I've got two Orders from the Soviet government, and as far as I'm concerned you're just an empty nobody and when I look at you I can't see nothing!"

Well then he took about three runs at me with his horse trying to trample me and laid me another one with his whip, but I remained firm on my props just like the whole proletariats' government, only my knee was smashed by the horse and I had an awful ringing in my ears from the skirmish.

"Move on ahead!" They drove me to the small hill near where my Nikon lay floating in blood. One of them got off his horse and turned him belly up.

"Look", he says to me. "We'll doctor you up like we did your sekretary unless you renounce the Soviet government."

They had pulled down Nikon's pants and underwear and settled the whole sex question with their swords. To look at such an insult made me sick and I turned away.

Fomin jeered: "Don't turn your nose away! We'll fix you the same way and we'll set a bright fire to all four corners of your communist infested village!"

But I'm hot-headed when it comes to words, so I couldn't stand it no longer and I answered them very sternly: "Let the birds sing for my funeral, but as for our village, it's not alone; there are thousands like it scattered all over Russia!"

Here I pulled out my tobacco-pouch, struck a light and began to smoke. Fomin, pulling the reins of his horse, rode up to me and said: "Say, brother, how about a smoke? You've got tobacco, but for two weeks we've been choking on horse-manure cigarettes. Let us have some, and we'll not chop you up but just kill you like we were in a decent fight, and we'll send word to your folks so they can pick you up and bury you. But hurry; we ain't got all day."

So there I stood, tobacco-pouch in my hand, and it hurt me real bad to think that this tobacco, grown in my own garden and mixed with fragrant "domnik" which was specially cultivated on Soviet soil, would be smoked by such sinful parasites. I looked at them and saw how awful anxious they were for fear I might throw the tobacco to the wind. Fomin started leaning down from his saddle to get the pouch and his hand was all shaky.

But I did just that, tossed the tobacco in the air and said: "Kill me any way you want. My lot is to receive death by the Cossack sword and yours, buddies, is to undoubtedly dangle from a windmill—so it don't make no difference."

So they commenced to hack me very methodically and I fell on the ground. Fomin shot me twice, once through the chest and once through the leg, but then I heard shots from the road.

Bullets buzzed around us and rustled in the weeds. My murderers jumped up and went tearing off. I saw the village militia raising dust up the road. Recklessly I leaped up and ran about thirty yards, but blood got in my eyes and the ground spun under my feet.

I remember shouting: "Brothers, comrades, don't let me die!"

And then I blanked out.

For two months I lay like a log, couldn't talk or remember a thing. When I came to I looked and saw my left leg was in absentia, cut off because of the gangrene.

Later I came home from the regional hospital. One day when I was limping along near my hut, into the yard rides the stanitsa military commander, and without even a greeting he begins questioning me: "Why were you called Chairman of the Revolutionary Soviet and why did you proclaim a Republic in your village? Don't you know that we have just one Republic? For what reason were you establishing separate autonomy?"

But I had a very good answer for him: "I'll tell you, comrade, just don't take it so hard. I can explain the Republic: it came up because of the Whites, but now

with everything peaceful it's called village Topchanski again. But keep one thing in mind: if it happens all over again and there's an assault on the Soviet government from the White hydras and the like scoundrels, we'll manage to turn every single village into a fortress and a republic. We'll put the old men and the youngsters on horses and I myself, although I'm minus one leg now, will be the first to go and categorically spill my blood."

He hadn't no comeback at me, so he shook my hand very vigorously and left the way he came.