

# Around Jakub by Michal Vrba

*Translated by Mike Baugh*

Lord! Protect us at this hour! Lord, save us from misfortune! The prayer was a scream inside her and she stepped off the porch onto the courtyard grass, approaching them.

“What do you want with him?” she shouted. “He didn’t do anything! What do you want? Leave us alone.”

The barrel of the pistol swung up sharply and aimed directly at her chest. The officer looked at her with narrowed eyes and quickly shook his head.

“Стой! Один шаг! Один шаг и твои ребята сироты!”

She didn’t understand every word of the Russian, but she understood enough – *Stop, one ... and your ... are orphans* – the gaps were filled in by the tone. The warning was clear. She stopped, but she didn’t stop screaming.

“For the love of God! Leave him alone! He didn’t do anything. What on earth do you want?! He hasn’t done anything!”

“Он ничего не сделал? Этот сукин сын ничего не сделал? Шлюха! Ты пошла в жопу!”

Again, she understood some of it – him shouting *He didn’t do it?* in disbelief. The rest seemed to be a vulgar threat.

She stood silent, closed her eyes and awaited what would come. When she opened them, the officer was no longer aiming at her. With the pistol in his hand he motioned to his men, and the soldier who had originally thrust his submachine gun into the farmer’s back raised his leg and kicked him in the ass.

“Идти. Идти, хуй! Быстро!”

This she understood completely: *Come on, you prick! Hurry up.*

With the barrel of the gun pressed into his back, the arrested man offered no resistance; he went out the small door to where a truck stood idling. They picked up the rifle from where Fedya had dropped it and finally loaded the dead man into the uncovered back of the truck too.

Getting Sasha – the tall, gaunt soldier who had discovered the rifle that killed him behind the woodpile – into the truck wasn't easy. When he was in, they threw the burlap sack back over him.

She peeked through the gap in the open gate and watched the car turn. For a split second she saw her husband on the back seat between the soldiers. Then the truck straightened out and the engine roared.

The sound of the truck carrying the arrested man could be heard through the woods. She clenched a fist and sank her teeth into it to keep herself from crying again. Her eyes darted around the courtyard in horror until they fixed on Jansta.

“Jansta! Jansta, what do we do? For Christ's sake, what do we do?”

“What do we do? What do we...? We wait. That's all we can do – wait and pray that the truth comes out,” he said in resignation. He was still nervous from the roar of the truck, as well as the gun that was trained on him. Unsure of what to do with himself, what to do with his hands, he walked over to her, perhaps hoping to grab her around the shoulders, to hold her, to comfort her and ease her fear.

She recoiled, her face red.

“Wait? For what? This isn't going to fix itself. I'm not waiting!” she screamed into his face and headed towards the gate.

Suddenly Jansta was different. He reached under her shoulder and yanked her back by the arm.

“What the hell are you doing, woman? Think about where you're going! You'll tell the soldiers to let him go and it'll all be fine? Think! If you do anything, go to Městec – to the townhall or the police station or something. After all, our laws apply here, not theirs. They

can't let this happen. Find someone who can do something about them!"

She turned it over in her mind for a moment. Just a moment. Then she slowly shook her head.

"No, Jansta, there isn't time," she slipped out of his grasp, "I have to get to him now!"

"Get ahold of yourself, Anna!" Jansta yelled. "What could you possibly do there? Pull yourself together – for your children's sake, if nothing else! Do you even know what that officer was yelling at you? He wanted to kill you!"

Again she shook her head. Then she went to the cottage door, locked it and took the keys. She kept at it:

"There's no time! Go to Mrs. Křížová's – the kids can stay there. I'll bring him back!" she told Jansta forcefully. But tear after tear rolled down her cheek. "I... I have to... I'll bring him back."

Jansta tried to play the role of the firm but reasonable advisor:

"Anna, listen to me! Go get help in Městec... They won't listen to you. They don't even speak Czech!"

At last, she grabbed him, clutching at straws.

"So come with me. Come with me, Jansta... please."

Then she felt him move back, the motion so slight it registered more in his face than his body. She had his answer.

She pushed the key into his hand and ran out the gate of the courtyard to the road.

"Tell Franta to get back here to feed the cows and Lucina. And not to let them in the courtyard, there's broken glass everywhere, shards in the grass," she yelled to him through the gate. He stood there motionless for a moment or two, and then slipped the key into his pocket and with his head down, almost in a trance, he crossed the square to get to old Mrs. Křížová's house.

Before she got to the bridge, she ran into the Kovařík girls at the edge of the pasture. Their father, Ladislav, followed a few steps behind. The girls just stared at her, but their

father yelled something to Anna – he was probably asking why or where she was running, but Anna didn't catch it. Her blood screamed and her temples throbbed. She only raised her hand as a sort of greeting and ran on.

As she passed the creek and reached the Opposite Forest, as the people in Poušť called it, she stopped right at the fork of the path.

She felt them as soon as she reached the treeline.

First she heard the motors and the sound of metal, all the noises that don't belong in a forest. Still she didn't know exactly where they were. She took the main path, which split the forest into two halves and ran parallel to the town of Jakub.

When she reached the end of the spruce thicket, where the trail takes a sharp right, Anna had to slow down to a walk. She wasn't used to running like this. She felt the metallic taste of blood in her throat, the stabbing in her side. Still, she went as fast as she could.

The sound of the encamped army grew louder.

Finally, around the bend, she saw them.

Her first thought was: Well, they've really made a mess here!

The thick bushes she remembered here had been flattened by the parked tanks and the trucks. Between the vehicles stood the soldiers' tents. There was commotion everywhere. In addition to the machinery, there was an indescribable smell in the air: a strange mix of everything there, including the campfires and the pleasant smell of what was being cooked above them.

But also the stench of the latrines. Long wooden benches were laid out to the right of the thicket she had just come from. The four soldiers sitting on it shared the same expression of surprise when they saw Anna.

They said something to each other and then shouted to her. One sounded angry, the other seemed to be making a vulgar joke. Soldiers between the trucks and tanks and on the road turned after her. Her instinct was to stop, but shame and the presence of the four soldiers with their pants down drove her on into the bulk of the soldiers.

Here and there she heard a shout that was probably directed at her, but she

pretended that she hadn't heard anything. The fact that she wasn't beautiful was a blessing to her now. It had never bothered her before, and it certainly didn't now.

Kovařík's daughters would be another matter. Ladislav knows what he's doing – he won't let them be in the fields alone. When night falls, he won't even let them out onto the square.

She kept on going, passing shocked and indifferent soldiers.

"Halt!"

One ruddy, pitiless-looking soldier separated himself from the group that was squatting beside the tracks of the tank she had just passed. He stood in her way and crossed his arms.

"Что тебе здесь нужно...? Ну? Какой твой ответ?"

Her heart was already pounding from running; now there were new reasons. She shrugged her shoulders and stretched out her hands, as if she were pointing out all the havoc they had wrought:

"I... I'm looking for my husband, Karel... His name is Karel Bureš. He's here somewhere. They took him – but he didn't do anything. You have to believe me. He didn't do anything. It was Fedya, he was the one shooting!"

The soldier listened and his expression grew less formal. As she spoke he nodded twice, which gave her hope that he might understand what she's saying, what she means, so she kept pleading.

"I beg of you! Tell the soldiers who took him that he did nothing! Tell 'em to let him go! I... I saw it all with my very own eyes – I'll swear on it!"

The soldier nodded once more. Then with a sharp voice he asked:

"Что ты хочешь? Почему ты пришла в лес?"

He hadn't understood a word. It was clear to her that he had just nodded along.

Her chin began to quiver and again she closed her teary eyes. She felt him take her by the elbow and lead her along the path. He was telling her something, as if trying to calm

her down.

As they walked through the camp, it dawned on her how hopeless it would be in all this confusion to try to find the four who'd taken her husband, or even to find that damned Fedya.

There were hundreds of soldiers, and to Anna it seemed like chaos. The army was scattered throughout the forest where they had gotten the order to stop. The camp was much larger than she ever could have imagined. She looked around, as if she were dreaming, and she realized where the soldier was leading her. Despite the crowds and damage to these normally peaceful woods, she had kept her bearings.

They went to the road to Dymokury. He was leading her as if she'd gotten lost, and with every sentence, every plea, every explanation Anna made, the soldier responded with the same knowing nod he had earlier.

"There! Over there!" she suddenly cried, stabbing with her finger towards a large and dark tent and the two soldiers standing in front of it. Parked beside them was the open-backed truck, and poking out from the back was something that offered her some hope – the tip of a burlap sack.

The soldier, who up to now had just been leading a confused and lost local out of the camp, frowned. He hadn't expected any sort of complication. But she looked so desperate, yet somehow wildly defiant.

"There!" She kept jabbing her finger into the air towards the tent thirty paces away. "My husband! Karel Bureš! He's over there! I have to go there!"

She tried to break away, but the chivalrous usher suddenly held her with an iron grip.

"Это невозможно! Командир там!"

This was close enough to Czech for Anna to understand. *Not possible... The commander is there.*

"Ouch! Let me go! I have to get there!" she yelled, piquing the interest of everyone nearby, all the bored soldiers sitting around beneath the trees taking drags off their cigarettes. Even the two soldiers guarding the doors of the canvas tent took notice. One of

them shouted something to the red-haired soldier, and he answered back sharply with his version of the name the woman had said – KAA-rel BUU-reš.

The two at the door muttered a few words to each other and one disappeared into the tent. The soldier who had been leading her off, now stood where he was. As he shuffled in place, it was clear he would rather just drag her out of the woods and show her, or take her, the way back.

The guard stepped back out of the tent and someone else followed – a man in civilian clothes.

For an instant she hoped it was her husband, but no, it was a short man with a doughy face. He looked straight at her and said something in Russian to the soldier who had been leading her through the camp. Without a word the soldier spun on his heel and walked off in the direction he had come.

The short man's eyes followed the soldier as he walked off. Then he turned to her and without making eye contact, he spoke in Czech:

"Pardon me. Who are you and what do you want here? They said you were calling out someone's name."

When she heard her own language in this place, it was as if a great weight lifted from her chest. He was Czech – she was sure of it. He spoke without any accent. Perhaps there was still some hope. The idea that it might all turn out okay began to grow inside her.

There's someone here who understands, who can explain what's going on!

"Oh, thank God. Sir, my name is Anna Burešová. My husband is here somewhere! You have to tell them. They... They think he did something, something he didn't do. You have to save him. Whoever you are, you have to explain it to them!" She looked at him with such pleading eyes that he twitched nervously and his fat hand tugged on the collar of his white shirt as if it were choking him.

He looked at her, and his face twisted into an expression of sympathy. He gazed off into the trees, then spoke quietly but forcefully:

"Go home, Mrs. Bureš. Go home. Nothing can be done here... Not by you, not by

me...”

He looked sidelong at the ground, sucked in his lips and bit the lower one.

It was as if a bottomless pit had opened up beneath her. Her legs began to shake, and then her whole body.

“Is he okay?” she whispered, and in her mind she could already hear the answer – he’s dead!

The doughy man gave her a look of compassion. He turned his face away and spoke quietly, like a priest kneeling behind a confession booth:

“You have to understand, I’m here just as an interpreter... I’ve been here almost three weeks. My name is Hanzlík... I’m just some guy from Bydžov. Your husband is with the major who interrogated him, but they’re just going through formalities now.... He’s writing his farewell letter. As soon as he finishes it, Mrs. Bureš, they’ll shoot him. There is nothing that can be done. He shot that soldier who came to ask him for food. If it were anything else, he’d be tried by our side, but this is a different matter. I’m sorry...”

“Christ above! That is not true!” She was terrified; she couldn’t catch her breath. Gasping she said, “Mr. Ha—, Mr. Hanzlík, plea—, please explain to them it’s not true! I saw it all with my own eyes. I’ll swear to it on the Cross, on my children! Dear God!” She collapsed onto the ground sobbing. “He’s innocent! I... I saw it all. I’m a witness.”

Hanzlík wiped the sweat off the back of his neck with his palm, and looked anxiously at the soldiers milling around:

“Mrs. Bureš, I understand how difficult this is for you. I believe what you’re saying... During the interrogation your husband said the same thing. He swore too, but... it’s a civilian’s word against the word of a Russian soldier’s. They’re going to shoot your husband... I am so sorry. But think about yourself, and for God’s sake, don’t say anything to anyone. It won’t help your husband. They didn’t believe him and they won’t believe you. You’ll just make it worse for yourself. From what I know, the soldier who said he saw your husband shooting out from the fence – he didn’t say anything about you. If you want to keep living, don’t say anything.”



“But my husband didn’t shoot anyone, he didn’t do anything,” the woman on the ground cried, and suddenly she clasped the short man’s knees. “Help him, please, save him, sir! For all that’s dear, please save him! Dear Jesus, for the sake of our children, please save him!”

“Let go of me, ma’am. Let go of me at once!” he shouted. His voice suddenly cold, maybe even rougher than he had wanted. The soldiers around glared at them.

She obeyed. She raised her head, and her eyes now seemed empty.

“I cannot help you. Don’t you understand? It’s over!”

She lowered her head, as if she were taking a deep breath, and with considerable difficulty she got up, straightened her spine, looked into Hanzlík’s darting eyes, and seemed to grind the words between her teeth:

“Go there now and arrange for me to see him one last time. Tell that major of yours that my husband won’t have to waste his time writing a farewell letter, that we can really say goodbye... the two of us in person. Go! Go! At least get over there and do that! Otherwise, I’m not moving – even if they want to kill me.”

The fat man sighed and was about to tell the poor woman that it wasn’t possible, that she needed to leave, for Christ’s sake, to go to her kids and stop making scenes, or they’d shoot her right here on the road – but then he finally looked into her eyes.

And for the instant he held her gaze, he saw something that couldn’t be deterred, a resolve that nothing could break.

“Damn it, woman!” he cursed loudly, ignoring the soldiers now. He made a few quick steps and disappeared into the tent.

Not even a minute had passed and he was back out motioning her inside. Before she could enter, he stopped her with his palm:

“You have five minutes... and Mrs. Bureš – I had to guarantee that everything would go smoothly. So, please, no scenes. It would just make things worse... do you promise?”

This time she didn’t put up any resistance, she just nodded.

The tent was large, but it had been partitioned into smaller spaces, and so she was now following Hanzlík through a sort of corridor of trampled dirt. It reeked of sweat and bad tobacco. She smelled it, but nothing quite registered; her eyes were scanning the space to find the one face she knew.

Hanzlík made a left at the end of the hallway. They went through a plank door to enter a room walled off by wood and thick canvas. She briefly noticed a table and someone in a uniform sitting at it. She didn't pay it any mind. Through a small window she could see a soldier walking back and forth, but there on a chair in the corner—

She rushed over to her husband. He shot out of the chair and hugged her.

"Karel! Karel..." she sobbed, but he cut her off quickly.

The farmer gently took her arms from his neck and pushed her back enough that he could speak to her:

"There's no time, Anna. We have to arrange things. Go to my family in Chotěšice. My father and Václav will help you with the farm. At least in the beginning... What you can't manage, sell off. But hold off as long as you can, understand? Remember that time the branch came down on me? We talked about what we'd do if I couldn't manage? Well, it's really come down on me now... And the children, tell the children—" his voice broke and he closed his eyes.

When he opened them back up, they were wet with tears – the first tears she had seen in them since they buried two of their children, little Josef and Marie.

"No, Karel. For God's sake, I... I can't! Not this, please not this," she clutched herself against his chest. She sobbed, "You didn't do anything! You did nothing!"

Someone coughed. Anna raised her head and tried to see through her tears. Finally she was able to focus.

The cough came from Hanzlík, standing at the door, trying to remind her of what she'd promised. At last she noticed the imposing major sitting at the table, leaning back in his chair with his hands behind his head. He studied her with piercing eyes, and the moment he pursed his lips, his impressive mustache shook beneath his nose. About a meter off to his

side, a boy stood at attention. His uniform didn't fit at all, perhaps he was an aide or the major's valet.

Before Hanzlík could even protest, Anna came to the table, leaving her husband behind her. She looked into the eyes of the major and stated:

"He did nothing, officer. Karel Bureš didn't shoot anyone." And so he would understand, she shook her head with every word.

The major kept his eyes on her, and in a loud, imperious voice he asked Hanzlík what her words meant. He answered, and the officer said something back. She looked at Hanzlík who glared at her before resuming the look of respect he reserved for the major. He spoke to her, but looked directly at the major:

"Major Korechkov says that you should embrace your husband and say goodbye. You're needlessly pattering on about something you and your husband agreed upon. Now focus on your husband..."

The major smiled at her and beckoned her to embrace her husband. She looked at Hanzlík and then back at the major:

"Tell him I swear upon the lives of my children! And I've lost two of them, so I know what to expect from God if I'm lying. Tell him!"

As Hanzlík translated, the major began to shake his head impatiently, then he slammed his fist on the table. When he began to speak, she could hear a dangerous anger in his voice.

"What did I tell you, you ninny?!" Hanzlík seethed, but Anna didn't even look at him. "Major Korechkov says that he's heard thousands of oaths like yours before he got here – and not one of them was worth a soldier of the Soviet Union. You have no witnesses, so shut your mouth! Hug your husband one last time and then run off to those children whose lives you were swearing on."

Finally, she understood that there was no arguing with the officer's logic. She lowered her eyes, shrugged in resignation, bit her lips, and turned back to the farmer. The major crossed his arms in satisfaction.

“Anna, my Anna!” Her husband spread his arms to hold her, but they were left empty.

She stood in front of Hanzlík and screamed into his face:

“I *have* witnesses! Tell him. Some of his soldiers came around and saw those two shooting. They saw the rifle in their hands! Tell him that! Tell him!”

The major’s face turned scarlet, and Hanzlík squinted in hatred.

“That was your last chance! You promised me that you wouldn’t cause any trouble. I stuck my neck out for you, you stupid cow. Go to hell with those soldiers of yours. Did one of them happen to give you his name? This is a tank brigade – there are more than 1,500 soldiers here! You better get out of here before they cane you!”

The woman grabbed the white shirt on his chest and to everyone’s surprise began to smile.

“You did it! That’s it. You solved it with that cane comment! For there was one that needed one! He was older, crippled, dragging his leg – his left one! He limped with his left leg... and his hand was missing two fingers! Don’t tell me there are many like him here! He saw them shooting! Tell him—”

At that moment the major roared. The soldier walking in front of the window, hunched over as if bombs were falling on the forest. The officer screamed at her and he screamed at Hanzlík, behind whom appeared two soldiers with rifles – the convicted man’s escort. The major had just about enough of all this.

Red-faced, Hanzlík hastily stuttered through an explanation of what she had said, her proposal, but the major just waved his hand and barked an order. The soldiers at the door came inside. The convicted man’s escort had been arranged

And then a bird sang.

At least that’s what Anna first thought – the sound was so soft and high. Everything in the room stopped, and all of a sudden it was completely quiet. The major turned to the scrawny boy in the ill-fitting uniform:

“Что ты говорил?”

“Я знаю его,” the soft voice chimed, “это Ваня Орлов.”

The major asked something else – he still sounded angry, but the tone also betrayed curiosity and interest in learning more. The boy gave another sing-song answer. The major nodded, and the boy ran out of the room. The officer shouted a command at the escort, and they backed out of the door. Then he looked thoughtfully around the room and started to head off somewhere, but first he turned to Hanzlík and barked some cruel words in his face, some sort of threat.

Only the three of them remained in the room; the two soldiers on escort duty had gone out to guard the door.

“Where did they go?” the condemned man asked from the corner... Again feeling her husband’s presence, Anna went to him and buried herself in his embrace.

Hanzlík wouldn’t even look at them; he just hissed:

“Mishka, the major’s aide, said he knows the cripple. He sent him after him. I don’t know where the major went. But he said if you’re lying he will personally shoot you both. And probably me afterwards.” His face was serious when he said it, but the farmer could tell it was a joke to ease the tension. Even he was probably coming to the realization that these two villagers might not be lying, and what that would mean.

The farmer looked at his wife in disbelief.

“I didn’t notice anyone with a limp. Where did you see him? Are you sure about this? I couldn’t forgive myself if you—”

“When I went to the square for the children,” she cut him off. “He must have seen them. He stopped for a moment in front of the gate. I remember being afraid he’d come in too.”

The major returned shortly afterwards, sat at the table in silence, lit a cigarette, and looked out the window at a small section of the encampment and the back of the soldier outside.

The wait was long, silent, and tense. Finally there was a sound in the corridor, the soldiers at the door parted, and in walked the boy.

And behind him – yes! Yes, it was the crippled soldier who'd been in front of the gate.

It was him!

Her eyes could have burned holes in the man, but he betrayed no sign of remembering her. He was just surprised at having been summoned there.

The discussion that followed was in Russian, and she only understood a few random words. The major pointed to the famer and the man being questioned shook his head. Then the major pointed to Anna and the man looked at her intently. It became clear from his expression that he recognized her... He gave a quick nod and turned back to the major, curious.

He knows who I am – he remembers me!

They kept speaking. She held her husband tightly by the hand. She didn't understand, and desperately looked to Hanzlík; he, however, was focused on the questions being put to the soldier, and he paid her no mind. As he answered one question, the crippled soldier suddenly extended an arm in front of him, squatted on his healthy leg, and sharply waved his hand up.

She gripped Karel's hand hard and felt tears roll down her cheeks. And then more, and more. She almost fell into his arms. She began sobbing audibly, but no one even glanced in her direction. Her husband, however, clenched her tightly back. The dam had broken; the tension was released.

Vanya Orlov was imitating someone throwing a bottle into the air...

The major questioned him for perhaps another five minutes. The man being questioned, pretended to lift a rifle off the ground and take aim; he nodded at something; occasionally, he shook his head in disagreement. In the end, the major stood up unexpectedly and offered the soldier his hand. Vanya bowed awkwardly, saluted, and showing considerable confusion limped out of the room that now felt somehow very different.

It was almost as if the air had changed: it was easier to breathe. The major barked an

order into the corridor and went out again, trailed by Misha, the small aide.

As the lame man's back disappeared from the tent, Anna's eyes moved to Hanzlík. He was looking right at her now. She felt like the features in his face had grown softer. He gave her an encouraging smile, nodded, and quietly said:

"That soldier said the same thing as your husband. That the two were drunk – but more importantly that both of them had been at the courtyard, not just the one... that they fired the rifle... they were facing each other. He confirmed everything your husband said..."

The major returned alone, without his aide. He sat on the chair, leaned on the table, and looked at Anna in silence. With careful, deliberate movements his fingers rolled a cigarette.

"Will he let us go?" she asked cautiously.

"I don't know. I suppose so. He has more to deal with than just you two..."

"So what are we waiting for?" the farmer said impatiently.

"For the soldier who turned you in." As soon as he saw the fear cross her face once again, he added, "Calm down... He was clearly lying. And the major hates lying. He'll get to the bottom of this – you can be sure of it. He'll ask him what happened, and he'll talk... you'll see for yourself..."

"О чем вы говорите?" interrupted the officer in a firm, but not unfriendly, voice.

Hanzlík calmly told him what they were saying and the married couple from Poušť nodded at everything the interpreter said. The major pursed his lips, setting his mustache in motion. His hand with the unlit cigarette began tapping the table.

There was some more commotion in the corridor.

Fedya was even drunker than he'd been in the courtyard. It looked like he had come undone in the last hour and a half. His once round face looked gaunt, the rakish smile was gone. His eyes wandered around the room nervously, looking at everyone's face, but never stopping on anyone's. He'd look suspiciously at one person, then confused at the next, as if

he didn't know what was going on and was trying to figure out the correct role to play. Finally he settled on the easiest – one of surprised confusion.

“Теперь ты расскажешь, что случилось... в действительности.”

Fedya stood at an angle to Anna, so she could easily see his profile. She saw a quick twitch in the corner of his red eye; he began to blink like someone short-sighted when they try to look at something without their glasses. Then he did something that made the major angry.

Fedya knew it wouldn't go well. He could see she was there; he could see the furrowed brows of the officer. He couldn't lie, but he couldn't manage to tell the truth, either. In the end, he simply looked down and shrugged.

Without a word, Major Korechkov reached to his belt, pulled his pistol from the holster, slammed it down in the middle of the table pointing at Fedya, and put his palms on either side with his fingers spread.

Then he repeated himself, “Что слу-чи-лось... в де-йст-ви-тель-но-сти!” He pronounced every syllable so slowly and deliberately that Anna understood what he was saying: *What really happened!*

His voice quivering, Fedya began to speak. Before this merciless judge, he was afraid to pause for even a second. It was as if the life force were escaping from him as he spoke, like watching a balloon deflate, or the roots of the tree of life drying up – when he finished, he was simply a husk from whom life had long been extinguished.

The major had him taken away. He replaced the pistol in its holster, and motioned them over. He jerked his chin at Hanzlík who translated after each sentence:

“You are both free to leave. I apologize for what has happened. We still have fighting to do, and even I have my orders. It's true that sometimes they seem too rigid and can lead to bad things happening. But I am an officer in the Red Army, responsible for hundreds of men. You are lucky – if we were in the middle of combat, my subordinates would have shot you right in your courtyard without any trial... Do not ever speak of this. You would only cause problems for yourselves, and for yourselves alone.”



Then he stood and offered his hand to her, bowed graciously, and looked deep into her eyes, holding her gaze for a long time, as if he wanted to imprint himself in her memory. Afterwards, he turned to the farmer, gave him a firm handshake and spoke. Hanzlík interpreted:

“I apologize to you, ma’am. And you, sir – well, your wife’s persistence saved your life today. Live a good and contented life together. Please give your children the regards of Major Korechkov.”

They stood on the road at the edge of the forest with Hanzlík. They would have to keep out of the forest and go by the dam to get back to Poušť. They were forbidden to go back through the camp. Fine!

Hanzlík shuffled one leg in front of the other. He looked tired and the white shirt, sweaty by now, stuck to his stomach and back.

“So, farewell then,” Hanzlík said, looking off into the grass somewhere behind them. “Luckily it all turned out okay... And I’m sorry I called you a ninny or whatever I said... I was scared. Sometimes they can act like savages. But who knows what they’ve seen and been through... Well, goodbye... I should go.”

“Thank you,” the farmer said. “Without you, they would have killed us both. Come to Poušť sometime, we’ll take you into Záhornice for a beer, or go fishing or hunting—” he paused because a silly thought occurred to him.

He didn’t have a rifle anymore.

“Goodbye, and thank you – really, thank you.” Anna offered him her hand, then in a flood of emotions she rushed over and hugged him. Hanzlík stood with his hands at his side and looked embarrassed.

They walked down the road alongside the forest. All of a sudden, something occurred to Anna and she shouted to the figure before he disappeared back into the woods:

“Hanzlík! What will happen to that Fedya? The soldier. Will he be in the brig for a long time?”

This time the doughy little man looked straight at her. He closed his eyes slowly, and in a quiet voice he answered:

“If it were just a matter of shooting his comrade by accident, he might have a chance. But he lied to Korechkov... It’s up to the soldier now. He knows what he has to do...”

He waved one final time and was gone.

They walked together in silence. Right before they reached Poušť, Anna’s husband asked her:

“The children are with Mrs. Křížová? You go for them, I’ll go tend to the cows and Lucina. Tomorrow I’ll take her to pull wood out of the forest. I reckon we should lock the gate.”

“I gave our keys to Jansta. I’ll get them from him, then get the kids and come back.”

Before they parted ways at the square, the farmer – out of character – suddenly stroked her hair:

“You didn’t even go for a scarf...”

That was it. But it was more than she ever would have expected.

She watched him heading off to their cottage.

Her husband was home.

It was three more weeks before the Russian army moved on.