

## Chapter 2

# Boyhood

### 2.1 It Is So Difficult to Become an “A” Student

In those years, even in the most intellectual families, it was not customary and actually considered counterproductive to teach children to read before starting school (“the child would be bored in class”). But my mother was sure that her “treasure” devouring one thick volume after another would be a straight “A” student<sup>1</sup> and infected me with this confidence too. Alas, the first days at school turned out to be a real shock to me. The fact that I could read fluently did not help me at all. Having just one time relished my virtuosic ability to read, the teacher Nina Vasilyevna Smirnova did not call on me any more, concentrating on teaching the overwhelming majority “Russian oral skills”. There were exactly 40 students in the class.

As to “written Russian” or “writing”, things were not going well at first. I clearly remember myself sitting at my desk with an open notebook and a pen in hand. I had to write a line of hooks like the cursive letter “i” but with no dot on top. You may say it’s easy, but I could not write it. First of all, ink blots! Whatever I did I could not dip my pen into the ink well and avoid the blots. If I made a blot I had to dry it accurately with a blotter – it was strictly forbidden to tear out pages from the notebooks. But even if I reconciled myself to the blot, how to picture a hook? In my ABC book it was beautiful: a correct tilt along the notebook oblique line, the bold and thin parts, the curvature were exquisite, but what did I have? Nothing good – what a repulsive sight. Nina Vasilyevna walked between the rows of desks and repeated: “make thick lines”. I was a diligent boy, understood her literally and pressed down the pen with all my might. The paper naturally gave in sometimes and got torn. Add to this picture the endless variety of sizes and tilts of my hooks! Then followed the result: “Maz’ya – a “C”! Afterwards a “C” for circles and one more for commas and periods. They were bad too.

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<sup>1</sup> In Russian schools the highest grade is “5”, not “A”.

Mother was seriously alarmed. "Next time I will leave you for the after school program and won't take you home" – she threatened while returning home with me. I did not take her words at their face value, but my mood was nasty. I was sadly following my Mom along Marat Street. "I am making thick lines but they are not beautiful," I tried to justify myself desperately. After a talk with the teacher Mother found somewhere old samples of writing that could not be discovered in any stationary stores in 1945, we sat down at table and I finally learned how to write "thick lines". Under Mom's vigilant supervision I began copying the calligraphic samples better and better, and soon (what a marvel!) the ugly duckling turned into a beautiful swan – I began getting "A's" for writing exercises.

True, I have to confess that frequently even after a year, two or three I had to correct my home work with an eraser or a razor blade. If it did not help, then, in spite of the teacher's ban, I had no alternative but to try and replace the damaged pages with new ones! Let's assume that you made a blot. At first sight, there is no problem – you yourself or with Mother's help straighten out the staples, remove the unwanted page, replace it with a newly reproduced text, and press the staples down into the initial position. It's impossible to find any evidence of the crime! Nevertheless, my dear reader, don't rejoice too early because it is possible to stumble over complications, which sometimes may be quite serious. For example on the reverse of the damaged page Nina Vasilyevna might have written something in red ink. You may ask what can be done in this situation? But I can't give you any advice.

Other types of antagonistic contradictions might take place too. For example the same ink blot with the difference that it was made when writing a test paper that had to be submitted urgently. As you see yourself it was not easy to get "A's" in written Russian!

Some of my readers may be interested in learning my first school year results in arithmetic. Here is an honest answer: problems existed, but only in calligraphy. So, after I learned how to write letters I could accurately reproduce numbers as well. The simple arithmetic operations were not difficult for me, but mental reckoning was always mediocre.

I hated the "combined action" problems that were introduced in the third or fourth year. For example two pipes filling up a tank or trains moving towards each other from points A and B. It was somewhat strange to regard as a unit unknown quantities of liters or kilometers. Fortunately the teacher did not object when, in the fifth grade, I began solving arithmetic problems using Xs and Ys although they belonged to algebra, not arithmetic.

According to my "Personal Record", on June 19, 1946 I was moved up into the second grade in the capacity of an "A" student. Unfortunately the beautiful expression "an 'A' student" should be understood in its wider sense because the school progress record clearly stated that in addition to an A for conduct (a lower grade would be an emergency), two A grades in Russian (written and oral) and one in arithmetic, Vladimir Maz'ya got two B's in his first school year. "How come?" a surprised reader may ask. I would sadly answer: "Serious obstacles appeared in the curriculum, they could only be overcome by a really gifted student". Just a wish was not sufficient. I am talking about "drawing and modelling" plus "physical

См. 498324

ОБЩЕОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫЙ КОМИССАРИАТПРОСВЕЩЕНИЯ РСФСР**ЛИЧНОЕ ДЕЛО**

№ 215 207 / мужская  
 (тип школы)  
 ика Ленинграда Куйбышевского (№ школы)  
 ода района  
 ла края  
области

**ОБЩИЕ СВЕДЕНИЯ ОБ УЧАЩЕМСЯ**

Фамилия, имя, отчество Мазы Владимир Ильич  
 пол: мужской, женский (подчеркнуть)  
 родился в 1937 году, в \_\_\_\_\_ месяце \_\_\_\_\_ числа  
 место рождения (город, село) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ района \_\_\_\_\_ края (области)  
 национальность еврей  
 время поступления в школу 1945 год сентябрь \_\_\_\_\_  
 с поступления в школу обучался в \_\_\_\_\_

где и куда выбывал из школы, почему \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

метка о принятии в школу (при переводе из одной школы в другую) \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

адрес учащегося: Марата 19 кв 4  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Photo 2.1** (a–c) Vova Maz'ya's Personal Record (© Vladimir Maz'ya, private collection).  
 (c) A page from Vova Maz'ya's Personal Record (© Vladimir Maz'ya, private collection)

Предметы		СПЕШАЕМОСТЬ И ПОВЕДЕНИЕ УЧАЩЕГОСЯ (по годам и классам)											
		1945/46 уч. г.	10/46/47 уч. г.	10/47/48 уч. г.	10/48/49 уч. г.	1949/50 уч. г.	1950/51 уч. г.	1951/52 уч. г.	1952/53 уч. г.	19 уч. г.	19 уч. г.	19 уч. г.	19 уч. г.
1. Русская яз.	Устный	5	5	5	5	5	5	4					
	Письменный	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5				
	Общ. отм.												
	Устный												
2. Родная яз.	Письменный												
	Общ. отм.												
	Устный												
	Письменный												
3. Литература													
4. Арифметика		5	5	5	5	5	5						
5. Алгебра								5	5				
6. Геометрия								5	5				
7. Тригонометрия									5				
8. Естествознание					5	5	5	5	5				
9. История					5	5	5	5	5				
10. География					5	5	5	5	5				
11. Физика							5	5	5				
12. Химия								5	5				
13. Геология и минералогия									5				
14. Астрономия									5				
15. Иностранный язык (итальянский)									5				
16. Иностранный язык (французский)				5	5	5	5	5	5				
17. Рисование и лепка		4	4										
18. Черчение							3						
19. Физическое воспитание		4	-	5			4	4	-				
ПОВЕДЕНИЕ		5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5				
ИТОГИ ГОДА (переведен в следующий класс, оставлен на второй год, исключен, вынужден и т. п.)		Переведен	Переведен	Переведен	Переведен	Переведен	Переведен	Переведен	Переведен				

Photo 2.1 (continued)

Дата	НАГРАДЫ И ВЗЫСКАНИЯ	Основание
19/IV	Переведен отличником во II класс.	Решение педагогического совета
15/V	Переведен отличником в III класс.	Решение педагогического совета
15/V	Переведен отличником в IV класс.	Решение педагогического совета
15/V	За отличную успеваемость и поведение приказом директора по школе награжден полковой грамотой. Переведен в V класс.	

Photo 2.1 (continued)

education”. “But a B is not a bad grade, is it?” would be said by a benevolent reader, and it would be silly to argue. However, in these subjects grades lower than B would never have been given me in order to keep the high level of the school results. Not only A students but also those with B grades were valued.

## 2.2 The Importance of Being an “A” Student

At the very beginning of my school life I sat at a desk positioned in the middle of the classroom. When I complained that I could not see well the words on the blackboard Nina Vasilyevna seated me right in front of her at the first desk of the middle row. Years passed, teachers changed, but I continued to sit in front of the teacher’s table.

Generally speaking that place was not very popular because from the point of view of a regular student it had obvious drawbacks: you are under constant control of the teacher, it is hard to crib, and there’s no one in front of you to poke in the back in order to be prompted.

All of that is indisputable, but I also found advantages of my old haunt that partially compensated for the negative features. The first one – a possibility of a silent inculcation into the mind of the teacher sitting in front of you that calling you up to the blackboard is undesirable at this moment (an imploring stare, a suffering mien and so on). The second, and more important – the knowledge of what was written in the Class Journal. It took only to raise yourself a little and stretch out your neck and the journal was in plain sight. Judging by the checks next to names you could definitely see who would be called on by the teacher. If at the end of a quarter you saw that almost everyone had been called up to the blackboard twice, but you only once, then, sure thing, get ready. Warned means armed. You’d be the first to know the grades for a test, etc.

However as important as your whereabouts in the classroom may be, your so to say “geographic” position could not open all the opportunities that the status of an “A” student could be capable of. My practical experience showed that a high achiever’s life was easy. He was allowed to do many things a simple mortal could not even dream of. For instance, being an “A” student you would always find understanding on the part of the teacher if you notified him/her before the class started that it was not a good day to call on you because of a bad headache you had had yesterday. The teacher in his/her turn might hint that tomorrow a Regional Inspection Commission was expected, so it was advisable not to fall flat on one’s face. Is it really necessary to explain why teachers needed “A” students?

But *noblesse oblige*: if you are an “A” student you react to every “B” as to a traumatic event. Some of those “B’s” are annoying even today. This is the other side of the coin. When looking back I think that a lack of relaxation supported my disaffection with the school, and this aversion grew from year to year.

However, I concealed my antipathy in such a masterly way that no one suspected it, not even Nina Vasilyevna. Here is how she warmly characterized me leaving our group to the cares of a new class supervisor:

Характеристика  
ученика 5<sup>го</sup> класса В.С.Сред.ш. школы  
Мазы: Владимира.

Мазы Владимир отличный ученик.  
Спокойный и старательный. Обладает  
живым умом. К учебе относится  
серьезно.

В общественной жизни класса принимает  
активное участие. Избранная заместителем  
председателя совета отряда.  
Выступил с докладом на универ-  
ситетских выборах.

Хороший, отзывчивый товарищ.  
Помогает отстающим и высту-  
пает за них ученики.

Знания свои имеет отлично. Готовится  
к экзаменам много и серьезно.

Мать работает, но внимательно  
следит за учебой и дисциплиной сына.  
Уч. 507. С. 100 и

**Photo 2.2** A facsimile of the Character Reference after the fifth grade (© Vladimir Maz'ya, private collection)

Character Reference for the third year "D" Class student, School No. 207

Vladimir Maz'ya

All the three years he studied in School No. 207.

Each of the years he finished as an "A" student.

Marvelously good abilities in studying. Reads a lot of books.

A good companion to his peers,

a public-spirited and active boy.

He headed the issuing of 5 wall newspapers.

He helps poor achievers with great pleasure.

Mentally developed, quick-witted, resourceful,  
polite, and disciplined.

5/19/48  
*Class supervisor*  
N. V. Smirnova

## 2.3 Slingshots

Slingshots were fashionable for a long time in schools and streets. These small arms were of various types and different striking force. A perfect slingshot is a Y-shaped piece of wood with a rubber band attached to its horns. While holding fast the vertical part of the Y in the palm of your left hand you place a pebble in the middle of the rubber band, strongly pull it away using your thumb and index finger of the right hand and release the pebble. Although this design had been known for centuries it was not very popular in my young years because of probable complications when shooting at living targets. The pebble might pluck out an eye and making a slingshot of this type was not too easy.

Somewhat later slingshots made of wire appeared and were used when playing soldier, while the bullet was an ashberry. Understandably such slingshots were used in the wild and at the end of summer. An alternative weapon could be a simply made “blowpipe” – a part of a tubular plant belonging to the umbellate family. You put a handful of elder-berries in your mouth, bring the blowpipe to your lips and blow strongly. It’s hard to miss the target.

But a really easy to use, and universal, as to time and place, construction turned out to be a slingshot whose fabrication did not require anything but a short resilient rubber string procured for instance from your briefs. The rubber string is attached to the thumb and index finger of your left hand with the help of two loops at each end of the string and voila! we have a slingshot. Shooting is performed with “pellets”, that is paper or metal staples. You hook up the pellet to the rubber string, pull back and shoot. Very handy.

A paper pellet is a bent-in- half twisted strip sometimes slobbered all over to preserve its shape. It was widely used in battles during school breaks and even in class although less often when one of us would grasp his own neck and whirl at his desk in search of the aggressor. “Maz’ya, stop fidgeting about!” “But he shot at me, Nina Vasilyevna.”

The metal pellets, that is staples made of a soft wire, were not regularly used inside buildings, but the sidewalks of Marat Street were sometimes literally littered with them. I did not make pellets myself – no need, your supply could always be replenished in the street.

Although memories of slingshots of the first two types leave me indifferent and are included here just to make the picture complete, the simple rubber slingshot once caused strong emotions in me. I was about nine. On an early evening in August 1947 when Mom had not yet returned from work I hung about alone on Marat Street not far from the main entrance of our house and as usual secretly shot my slingshot at posters, lamp posts, and other motionless targets as well as at girls’ legs and car wheels passing by. These actions brightened up my time and spiced up my stroll.



Suddenly I saw a “Pobeda” car<sup>2</sup> driving on the other side of the street, then making a U turn at Kolokolnaya, it braked abruptly near me. A taxicab driver jumped out of the car, grabbed my arm strongly, pushed me into the car, cursed and promised to take me to the Militia station.<sup>3</sup> It was an unexpected threat: “Why, Sir? What did I do?” Instead of an answer he showed me a crack in the windshield where a pellet had hit! In spite of my entreaties to be spared and my tears, the “Pobeda” was implacably taking me away from my house along Vladimirsky and Liteyny Avenues. Finally, next to the Neva, my abductor, having learned that my mother was at work and father died in the war, stopped the car, dragged me out to the sidewalk, twisted my ear till it bled and drove away. I was saved, but my home was far away. I remember it was not difficult to find my bearings, but someone who knows the place would confirm that it would take some time to reach the corner of Kolokolnaya and Marat Streets. One of our neighbors who happened to witness the abduction had already told my mother returning from work that I had been taken away by a taxi driver. Fortunately, my poor mother did not have time to rush to the Militia before I came home.

## 2.4 Illnesses

When in Sverdlovsk I endured most of the children’s diseases such as measles, mumps, chicken pox, and innumerable common cold virus diseases (now called ARDS, for acute respiratory distress syndrome). Every winter and early spring I walked around sniffing. They would say I caught cold. But the feelings I had during the illnesses of the evacuation period disappeared from my memory completely together with recollections of such a nasty illness as *tuberculous bronchadenitis*.

True, a certain event connected with the disease considered dangerous at that time was well retained in my memory as my mother retold it to me many times. She recalled that the doctor who made my diagnosis prescribed wholesome food and antibiotics. But the first years of war were difficult. Though there was no real starvation in Sverdlovsk, the supplies were dwindling. Rationing had been enacted, my mother’s wages were miserable, and she did not receive any pension. Anyway, my food problem had to be resolved by her herself. The situation with antibiotics seemed desperate. They were a new remedy, not for sale in pharmacies.

Then, according to my mother a miracle happened. One floor below us there was a door of the flat occupied by a little girl Rosa (somewhat older than I) and her grandmother. They were evacuees from Moscow. Rosa’s last name was Tevosyan which at that time was known to the whole country because Rosa’s father was the

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<sup>2</sup>This type of car was produced in 1946 and named “Pobeda” – “Victory”. It became a very popular car and its production lasted for a very long period of time.

<sup>3</sup>“Militia” was a name for the police after the Bolshevik revolution. It was changed back to “Police” in 2011.

People's Commissar<sup>4</sup> of the USSR ferrous metallurgy. As most of my time was spent in the kindergarten boarding school, I was not well acquainted with Rosa, but Mom greeted her grandmother at the staircase or in the yard. "She loved you a lot" my mother told me already in Leningrad. Well then the old woman after learning of my mother's misfortune once brought us a box with hard to procure food and tablets of synthomycin. I recovered and was sent by Mother to the Tevosyans to thank them. I remember my timid ringing of their door bell and an invitation to have some tea.

I can't say anything interesting about my measles that I had at 4. Definitely my measles was like any measles – running nose, cough, high fever and rash. But staying in bed and being alone for days played an important role in my life. The thing is that it was exactly at that time that I got an ABC book at my disposal, and I very quickly learned how to read. The only question that turned up during my self-studies that I had to ask my cousin Zorik after he came home from school was about the soft and hard signs.<sup>5</sup> My cousin's examples of the pronunciation of words with these signs clarified everything.

After that episode, sick or healthy, I was never bored in the possession of an interesting book. Sometimes the kindergarten teacher would seat a group of children around me and said: "Vova will read for you". Talking to her relatives Mother boasted: "He learned how to read when he was four!" I must confess that emphasizing this fact at any convenient moment was pleasant to me; it strengthened my not yet too solid belief in my talents.

I already mentioned my positive attitude to kerosene. Now I would add a hypothesis about its origin at the kindergarten time. It's a clear reminiscence about the ability of kerosene to rid us of lice, breeding in huge quantities at the kindergarten. An even less appetizing memorable event of that time involved me and surely my contemporaries whose childhood was passed in the far-from-perfect sanitary conditions of kindergarten boarding schools. Those conditions were responsible for an intolerable itch in the groin before falling asleep. It was caused by small worms (threadworms) laying eggs in the anus. They were exterminated with the help of large amounts of garlic used with food. I must confess: all my life I have liked garlic but not because of its vermifuge properties.

Well, as I have recalled the two sources of skin itch experienced in my childhood: lice and threadworms, it would be unjust to forget about the third one. This unpleasant sensation, especially in the palm of your hand and the sole of your foot, accompanies the granular red rash caused by scarlet fever. This disease, once fatal for children, but not dangerous with the advent of antibiotics, struck me in Leningrad in the early spring of 1949.

Once I came home and felt somehow out of sorts. Chills. The thermometer showed at first 38.5°,<sup>6</sup> then 39. Feeling hot and cold intermittently. I got to bed.

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<sup>4</sup> In early Soviet times the rank of People's Commissar was equal to the rank of "minister".

<sup>5</sup> These are called signs because they do not refer to any sounds like letters.

<sup>6</sup> In Russia, temperature is measured on the Celsius scale. Normal (healthy) temperature on this scale is 36.6°.

When Mother returned from work my thermometer was almost at 40°. It was the first time in my life! The next morning there was a rash. Scarlet fever! It meant you would be sent to a hospital for 3 weeks and nothing could be done about it, besides it was done not to protect your precious health, but to prevent infecting others.

The terrible word – “hospital”, who would like to go there? But an ambulance was already on the threshold. It was a long trip, together with my mother, to the place of my future confinement. The hospital was for children and it was situated somewhere on the outskirts of the city. (My memory tells me that its name started with a “p”, but that’s all I remember.) Mother took home my belongings and in the admission room they gave me a gown and slippers. Afterwards – a cold shower, and the nurse took me to the ward, a long room with two parallel rows of metal beds. Most of them were occupied by boys of different ages, and one bed was empty intended for me.

I endured the hospital life with stoicism, but at the end it became intolerable. There was nothing to read and there was no desire to ask Mother to bring something from home. First of all, I had read all my home books already, and secondly, books brought to the contagious isolation ward were not returned. Our food was scant even in the opinion of such a food hater as myself. There was a draft from the ward windows which were not weather proofed, and probably because my bed stood by the window sill and we covered ourselves with thin cotton blankets I developed a running nose. As a result it was necessary to familiarize myself with medical inhalation, that is inhaling steam which was not repulsive by itself, but whether it helps to treat a cold is still unknown to me.

Worst of all was “mobbing” (a new expression in Russian) directed against me. To explain it clearly and without pretension, it happened that at some time they began to tease me in the ward with such words as “little Jew”, “little Yid” etc. This was initiated by a newcomer and no one objected.

It is interesting that at school at that time nothing like that occurred, because even out-and-out hoodlums respected me. Appearing at school early in the morning I gave my homework to anyone who wanted to copy it. In class I prompted all those who suffered at the blackboard, and sent out cribs during tests. In a word I was useful to those who did not provoke me.

But though I could not expect any help at the hospital, deliverance came soon. The “mobber”, as they call an instigator of mobbing, was unexpectedly transferred to another ward, and my troubles finished at once. A happy end resulted from the following events.

Mother asked me to write her every day, which I did, accurately knowing that she would surely come here after work in order to receive my letter and answer it. Then, one day she arrived at the hospital and did not discover my missive in the mail pigeon hole with the letter “M” on it. Alarmed about the fate of her son, Mother with difficulty persuaded the nurse to ask me what was going on, and received my answer that I had sent the letter and everything was OK. Well, the letter had disappeared, and Mother calmly returned to Marat Street.

What was that letter and what happened to it? I’ll describe it now.

Not long before I was taken ill with scarlet fever Fimka B., my bosom buddy since the first grade, lent me the “Military book”, very popular stories telling children about crossbows, cannons, airplanes, submarines, etc. There was also a section about the Morse Code. You know: dot – dash – dot and so on. My younger readers may be interested to know that in the heyday of telegraphers and radio hams the Morse Code was quite popular as an element of the military patriotic education of the young Soviets. The book was fascinating and when reading it I incidentally learned the Code. Fimka did the same, and we sometimes used tapping for communication.

At the hospital, fearing to write Mother openly (and sealed letters were not allowed!) that the boys called me a Yid my decision was to use the Morse Code. The idea was that she would find the explanation of the Code in the “Military Book”, but it turned out it was not necessary.

Perhaps not all of our letters were inspected at the hospital, but after Mom questioned one of the nurses it became clear that my cipher had been intercepted and read by someone. As a result the anti-Semite was transferred from my ward to another one.

So far, enough about diseases.

## 2.5 “Physcult” and Sports

The strange first word in the above title is an abbreviated form of “physical culture”. That was what we called the subject which I did not like at school.

Who was our “physcult” teacher in the elementary school and what we did in class has escaped my memory, but I clearly remember the boisterous games played by us in the school hallways during breaks: the wild running and “docking” with each other using one or two legs. A challenge to single combat (let’s “dock”!) was a standard call to “measure swords” with someone and never ended up in a brawl.

In the fifth grade and later on, my attempts to qualify for the “BPLD”<sup>7</sup> rating in “physcult” classes were unsuccessful which could be predicted as I was prepared neither for labor nor, all the more so, for defense.

“Physcult-hurray-hurray-hurray!  
Be prepared  
For the hour  
When the enemies won’t be spared. . .”

This was the song by the poet Lebedev-Kumach who, to no avail, tried to persuade me to follow his call in every-day radio transmissions. However, his advice to become “hardened like steel” produced on me a certain effect – I began taking a cold shower every morning and got ill with a sore throat. No intent on my

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<sup>7</sup> “Be Prepared for Labor and Defense” sports rating for young children.

part to agree that *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, but after the illness I had no inclination to take cold showers.

In the “physcult” classes when making a high jump I stopped before reaching the bar; I could throw a grenade only to the distance of 15 m instead of 25 required by the “BPLD”; while running 1 km I got sharp pains in my side; I was unable to make a handstand, while parallel bars, horizontal bars, vaulting horse and buck were torture instruments to me. Still, I discovered that, when climbing a rope, if you held it with one foot and gripped it in the bend of the other you could pull yourself up with almost no effort, and iterating these moves you could reach the ceiling, but this was an insufficient consolation.

When I grew older, all I could achieve in football was becoming a dedicated fan of the Leningrad “Zenith” team, although in the elementary school I used to play as a center forward, defenseman and even a goatee. Once I gained my teammates’ respect after I grabbed the ball off the center forward’s foot when he broke through close to the goal. Where and when the match took place, what team I played with, who the opponents were? I can’t remember for the life of me. But the feeling of pride remains.

Stop! I have suddenly recalled when and where we kicked the ball about. That happened in the fall of 1949 in the backyard garden of girls’ school No. 209 on Vosstaniya Street. Our school near the Coliseum was overcrowded, several classes from it were transferred to the building of School No. 209 and the banished were given a new name – School No. 215. My class happened to be among them. I’d like to add “banished from paradise”: the distance from home to the school became about twice as large, and, in this respect, the situation worsened when we were given our own building on Zhukovsky Street near Liteyny Avenue.

Girls’ school No. 209 was in the location of the former Pavlovsky Institute of Noble Maidens where the action of Charskaya’s<sup>8</sup> novels takes place. Our classes received a small portion of the building completely isolated from the representatives of the fair sex.

We played football in the sports grounds located in the garden adjacent to the back side of the school invisible from Vosstaniya Street. It was exactly in that place where I was serenely walking when I took a crushing blow to my head with a football kicked by the boot of a grownup fellow. He calmly took his aim from the distance of about 15 m, struck the ball with all his strength, hit me smack in the middle of my forehead and roared with laughter joyfully. I was not up to laughing. But fortunately my glasses were not damaged.

It would not be correct to imagine that I was a complete weakling during my school time. Actually, when I was about 10 I learned all by myself how to swim: first on one side and my back, then the breaststroke. Even now I can swim for a long time without tiring, but much slower than my wife Tanya swimming a beautiful crawl. A little later I learned to ride a bicycle, and at some time discovered that my

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<sup>8</sup>L. A. Charskaya (1875–1937), a very popular author in the beginning of the twentieth century, but later proscribed by the Soviets for a lack of Communist ideology in her books.

hands were not too weak. It's not by chance that the rings were my preferred apparatus unlike the above mentioned hated ones. My participation in arm wrestling contests did not look bad. I once even deserved a nick-name "master of a steel squeeze" used by one of my friends. In the summer of 1948 on the Daugava river Uncle Aron taught me how to row.

However I could never show any success in adroitness, besides, starting from the second school year, I wore glasses for nearsightedness. Their strength in diopters grew every year, which allowed me in the senior grades to become exempt from physical culture, and in my university years from military training. In my youth I happened to familiarize myself with skis, but quite superficially, without a trainer. Also I had ice skates, at first the so-called "Snegurochki" – "Snow Maidens" which had to be awkwardly screwed on to regular boots, but when I was 14 my relatives gave me racing skates. Then I was able to take part in my classmates' trips to the skating rink at the Central Lunapark<sup>9</sup> with a half-conscious dream of meeting there a fair lady. Unfortunately my skating left much to be desired and I did not meet a fair lady at the rink.

The described modest success in sports helped me to avoid an inferiority complex, but a certain dream of my life did not come true – I never learned "to smash somebody's mug" although this skill was sometimes necessary.

I'd like to repeat that I hated the "physcult" classes and always tried to get away with such lame excuses as "I have a headache". One day, Yury Fedorovich, our sports teacher in the senior grades, a highly cultured man devoted to his profession approached me after class and said: "Vladimir, I hear that you are quite serious about science. But think of your health. You will need sports in your life." He himself died of a heart attack even before he was 50.

I have a medical hypothesis that explains my lack of appetite in my young years, and probably even the absence of enthusiasm for sports. In 1984, several days after a surgery intended to eliminate gallbladder stones, surgeon Nechay, professor of the Military Academy of Medicine told me: "I gave a lecture to my students in the morning that I called 'Professor Maz'ya's gallbladder'. You had an interesting congenital anomaly, and now your gallbladder is on display at the Academy museum." I wished I could have a glance at that bladder, but unfortunately entrance to the museum was not allowed to everybody. I thought: "Am I really everybody to my own gallbladder?"

The above-mentioned surgery left a long scar on my belly. It required general anesthesia and lasted for 4 h. When I came to it seemed to me I had returned from the other world – my body was icy. But nowadays they would have carried through the whole operation under local anesthesia, having pierced four small holes in my abdomen and thereafter would have sent me home on the same day. This is called laparoscopy.

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<sup>9</sup>The colloquial name of the Central Lunapark was "The Kirov Isles" or, officially, "S.M. Kirov Central Park of Culture and Rest".

## 2.6 To Me the Most Important Art Was the Movies<sup>10</sup>

Generally speaking I was familiar with migraine or as my mother once wrote to the teacher “headaches caused by anemia”. Both the real ones helped with pyramidon and analgin<sup>11</sup> and imaginary which I used extensively starting from, I think, the second grade. The latter type of headaches for example could be an excuse for playing hooky on the day of an undesirable test. In that case it was important not to be noticed by anyone in the lobby of the movie theaters “Coliseum”, “Artistic”, “Titan” or “October” concentrated on Nevsky Avenue between Marat Street and the Fontanka river. By the way, in those years the same films were shown almost everywhere.

Tickets for morning shows were accessible to me even taking into account the meager funds my mother provided me with for buying breakfast at the school cafeteria. Thus I could afford the luxury of not missing any movie recommended by my classmates.

“Did you see the ‘Flying Slowpoke’?”

“Nope!”

“There he in a big way – to her: ‘Come on!’ and she bombed those ‘Bang!!’”

It was clear: it needed to be watched.

Also “Tarzan” – “Aaaa – Aaaa!!!”. Then the “Girl of my dreams” from the trophy art collection. And from the prewar times “The Merry Fellows”, “The Circus”, “The Children of Captain Grant”. You can’t enumerate all of them. The art of the cinema really brightened up the difficult life of the schoolboy Vova Maz’ya.

## 2.7 A Sharp Kid

I liked solving riddles as early as during my stay in kindergarten. Do you remember: “No hands, no feet, but able to draw”, or “No windows, no doors, but the room is full of people”? Here is one more: “Seven jackets, no buttons”.<sup>12</sup> In time my riddle collection naturally grew richer. I’d like to describe now two encounters with riddles of a different type when I was in high school.

On 17 Suburban Avenue, not far from the “Five Corners”<sup>13</sup> my father’s two cousins lived, old maids Rosa Markovna and Grunya Markovna, a hunchbacked woman. By postwar standards they were well provided for and on holidays invited

<sup>10</sup> Periphrasis of supposedly Lenin’s words: “Of all the arts the most important one to us is the cinema”. This was a slogan displayed in all Soviet movie theaters.

<sup>11</sup> Names of medicines that are obsolete in modern pharmaceutical registers in America.

<sup>12</sup> The answer is “cabbage”.

<sup>13</sup> An intersection in Leningrad between three streets (rather than two); the third street joined the two as a sharp wedge.

their Leningrad relatives, including Mother and myself, to visit them. As I was the only child in the noisy company of grownups, I did not wish to take part in their conversations, and, because of that, between the main meal and the tea with rum cake or chocolate pie I withdrew to the corridor where, lighted up by a dim bulb, stood an old glazed mahogany bookcase. It was always locked, but each time after I swore to put all the books back to their places I received the key and subjected the bookcase to an avid investigation.

On the shelves, there were mainly religious Jewish books which I unfortunately do not understand even nowadays, but there were also files of Russian magazines including the incredibly interesting *Niva* – “The Field” where they published from issue to issue the detective novels by Louis Jacoliot.

Another treasure of the bookcase turned out to be the 1928 issues of the magazine “*Ogonyok*” – “Little flame”. They familiarized the public with the game called “*Victorina*” – the “Quiz” played by the readers themselves. Each series consisted of 50 various questions, such as for instance “Who discovered the tuberculosis bacillus?” “What is the present name of the former Nevsky Avenue in Leningrad?” “Why do they build skyscrapers in New York?” “In what city was Homer born?” “Who is Mark Twain?” “What is the most popular Soviet motion picture?” For a correct answer you were given two scores, for an approximate response the reward was one score. I solicited for permission (and got it) to take home the magazines with the quizzes and for a long time participated in trying to find answers to the questions alone or with friends.

I was inspired to solve riddles of another type by “*Leninskie Iskry*” – “Lenin’s Sparks”. That newspaper, intended for Octobrists and Pioneers,<sup>14</sup> was reissued after the war, and a subscription to it was earnestly recommended to parents by the class supervisor.

The mailman brought a new issue twice a week, and that was my own newspaper! I loved it and looked forward to receiving it. If I lived now in St. Petersburg I would definitely go to the “Public Lib” (Public Library) to refresh my memory, but here, in Sweden, I have to content myself with what’s kept inside me.

Here is a passage from the section called “Humor” that stuck in my memory. It dates back to no later than 1946 and is possibly from a reader’s letter. The text has been modified in translation. For some reason that I have forgotten, a boy only remembers words starting with the letter “S”:

Scratching Spine Samuel Stared  
 Suzanne Swallowed, Sam’s Scared  
 Sister Stole Samuel’s Soap.  
 Sam Suggests: Suzy, Stop!  
 Soap’s Spicy, Soap’s Sticky.  
 Sam says Sister’s Sickie  
 Sam Suggests: Suzy, Spit!  
 Silly! – Says She, Soap’s Sweet!

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<sup>14</sup> See Footnote No. 37 and 15 in Chap. 1.



The “Lenin’s Sparks” had a section “Ask us and we’ll answer” where once, in reply to my and many other readers’ request, there appeared information on how to assemble a detector radio (one of the simplest types of radio receivers).

It was the time when I first saw my last name in print. Later on it was repeatedly printed in connection with the “Club of Sharp Kids” – the name of the newspaper section containing brain-twisters: rebuses, crossword puzzles, chains of words, etc.

My classmate, Oleg Savichev, and I sent our solutions to the editors regularly, and on October 7, 1950, in the Section “The Final Result of the quiz ‘Travels for Everybody’ we found ourselves among the winners. Inspired by success we took part in another contest organized by the “Club of Sharp Kids” the next year. Again we were the winners. As an award I was given the book “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” by Beecher Stowe, and Oleg received an adventure book “The Dirk” by the Soviet author A. Rybakov. I think our success was gained thanks to the “Chain of words” that we ourselves compiled and sent to the editorial board. It turned out so difficult that no one could get the eight points necessary for the win. So, these points were given us and we won the contest.

The Chain of Words is played by using the last letter of a word as the first letter of the next word. Thus I would like to suggest my readers to check their knowledge too.<sup>15</sup> The Chain of Words appeared on May 16, 1951, No. 39, and on June 2, in the Section “Check Your Answers”, they published the correct solutions (see the Footnote).

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<sup>15</sup> What follows is a partial translation of the text in the presented picture. Oleg Savichev and Vladimir Maz’ya (School No. 215) compiled a Chain of Words “History of the Ancient World”; it has the following entries: 1 – holy cow in ancient Egypt; 2 – the Roman Consul who defeated the Carthaginian fleet in 256 BC; 3 – King of Sparta; 4 – the blind singer mentioned in Iliad; 5 – Member of the first triumvirate; 6 – the chief of revolted gladiators; 7 – a Roman statesman and writer, irreconcilable enemy of Carthage; 8 – a Roman emperor who adopted Trojan; 9 – a hero of ancient Greece epos; 10 – a Greek sculptor who left 1500 works of art for posterity; 11 – a Greek orator, chief of the democrats in Athens; 12 – a Spartan military commander; 13 – one of the sons of Rhea Silvia, the legendary founder of Rome; 14 – King of the state of Urartu; 15 – the first Roman emperor; 16 – a Roman emperor; 17 – the son of Odysseus (eight points).”

In this English text each word is given in Russian transliterated with Roman letters (to show the last letter in the Russian version), then the Russian word is given in English translation. Here are the correct Maz’ya’s and Savichev’s Chain of Words answers:

1. (Rus.) Khator – (Eng.) Hathor; 2 – (Rus.) Regul – (Eng.) Regulus; 3 – (Rus.) Leonid – (Eng.) Leonidas; 4 – (Rus.) Demodok – (Eng.) Demodocus; 5 – (Rus.) Krass – (Eng.) Crassus; 6 – (Rus.) Spartak – (Eng.) Spartacus; 7 – (Rus.) Katon – (Eng.) Cato; 8 – (Rus.) Nerva – (Eng.) Nerva; 9 – (Rus.) Akhill – (Eng.) Achilles; 10 – (Rus.) Lisipp – (Eng.) Lyssippos; 11. (Rus.) Perikl – (Eng.) Pericles; 12 – (Rus.) Lisandr – (Eng.) Lysander; 13 – (Rus.) Rem – (Eng.) Remus; 14 – (Rus.) Menua – (Eng.) Menna; 15 – (Rus.) Avgust – (Eng.) Augustus; 16 – (Rus.) Tit – (Eng.) Titus; 17 – (Rus.) Telemakh – (Eng.) Telemachos.



**Photo 2.3** Oleg Savichev and I in S.M. Kirov Central Park of Culture and Rest (© Vladimir Maz'ya, private collection)

ная перемена. А. УСКОВА

### Клуб смекалистых ребят

В чайнворде такие слова: 1 — священная корова в древнем Египте; 2 — римский консул, разбивший карфагенский флот в 256 г.; 3 — спартанский царь; 4 — слепой певец, упоминающийся в Илиаде; 5 — член первого триумvirата; 6 — вождь восставших гладиаторов; 7 — римский государственный деятель и писатель, непримиримый враг Карфагена; 8 — римский император, усыновивший Трояна; 9 — герой древнегреческого эпоса; 10 — греческий скульптор, оставивший 1500 произведений; 11 — греческий оратор, вождь демократов в Афинах; 12 — спартанский полководец; 13 — один из сыновей Рен-Сильвин, легендарный основатель Рима; 14 — царь государства Урарту; 15 — первый римский император; 16 — римский император; 17 — сын Одиссея (8 очков).

А вот кроссворд:  
**ПО ГОРИЗОНТАЛИ:** 2 — система правления, созданная при Октавиане; 5 — бог войны у древних римлян; 7 — предводитель грандиозного восстания сицилийских рабов; 8 — столица республики; 10 — привилегированная часть общества.  
**ПО ВЕРТИКАЛИ:** 1 — римские должностные лица; 2 — город, разрушенный при извержении Везувия; 3 — член первого триумvirата; 4 — полководец, в память победы которого над даками была воздвигнута сохранившаяся до настоящего времени колонна; 6 — выдающийся полководец, пожизненный диктатор Рима; 9 — консул, принимавший участие в югуртинской войне (5 очков).

Конкурс решения занимательных задач и головоломок заканчивается. Многие ребята присылают свои головоломки. Олег Савичев и Владимир Мазья (216-я школа) составили чайнворд «История древнего мира», а Виктор Прохичев из Керстовской школы, Книгинского района, придумал кроссворд «Древний Рим».

Редактор Т. В. ГОРОДКОВА

1. 23. Фонтанка, 57 (вход с Торгового пер.). 1). Телефоны редактор—А-0 79-33; отв. секретарь, научно-популярной культуры и спорта—А 4 54-90; литературный отдел—А-0 41-14; зам. редактора, анимальный отдел и отдел литературы и искусства — А 101-53; отдел писем и массовой работы—А 4 54-88.

**Photo 2.4** Our Chain of Words published by "Lenin's Sparks" (© Vladimir Maz'ya, private collection)

## 2.8 Foreign Languages

In my childhood, I was inspired with the idea of mastering foreign languages. I cherished a dream to become a polyglot like Jules Vern's Jacques Paganel and tried to make it a reality with no one's help. I laid hands on old textbooks of German, French, Latin, and Finnish successively or simultaneously. Is it necessary to say that those childish attempts could not result in anything serious? But at that time I did not think so and declared that I was going to become a linguist.

In Finnish I don't remember a single word; in Latin all that remains in memory are hackneyed aphorisms like "*In vino veritas*" and some less frequently used ones like "*Noli me tangere*". German, French, and Swedish had to be studied more seriously much later, and, I am ashamed to confess, no fluent speaking skills have been achieved by me.

In the third year at school they began teaching English. Arkady Osipovich, the English instructor, an impressive man of 40–50, while introducing himself to the class, told us that he had lived in England for a long time and wanted to teach us a genuine English pronunciation. Nevertheless, because he was absolutely bald, our class did not like him. He was nicknamed "the Baldy". At his lessons we openly played the fool.

I remember a tongue twister:

This is the sixth lesson.  
Is this the sixth lesson?

This is how he tried to teach us to pronounce "th". By the way, I managed to say it. I remember another little verse he taught us:

Mind the clock and keep the rule:  
Try to come in time to school.

When it came to pronouncing the sound corresponding to the letter "a" in a closed syllable, Arkady Osipovich urged us to open our mouths wide like frogs do. Then the class would begin to croak in a dissonant chorus, and a good half of the students would jump froglike between the rows of desks. The perplexed teacher was just watching the bacchanal unable to call the half-wits to order. I remember having remained sitting at my desk but shared the common merry making. Arkady Osipovich kept teaching our class till the end of the school year.

After him came the young Rimma Fedorovna who pronounced "this" as "zys", but she ruled us with a rod of iron right away. Then a terrible thing happened to her 3 years later: because of a "C" in the English language at the end of a quarter our classmate Roman Kreiman hanged himself. One of the teachers informed us of the disaster on the next morning. Everyone was depressed having suddenly felt the breath of death. So, when the English teacher came to give us a lesson we did not stand up and buzzed in chorus "oo-oo-oo". Poor Rimma Fedorovna!

As for me, at that time I became more and more certain that linguistics was not my vocation.

## 2.9 My Interests

When I was in elementary school, feeling a wonderful lucidity of mind and intellectual power, there was no limit to my interests or plans to choose a profession when I grew up. I'll try now to describe some of those.

At first, under the influence of Uncle Aron I became interested in geology. I remember us in the distant 1946 sitting together on the curb near our house examining the "samples" of crushed stone and pebbles that we had picked up in the traffic area of Marat Street, and I learned that granite consisted of quartz, mica, and feldspar; besides I singled out sandstone, shale, and gneiss.

In the summer of 1948 Uncle Aron, who was appointed Chief of the Leningrad Hydroproject expedition, took me along to come to the Latvian town of Kegums on the Daugava where he was busy with the geological prospecting for a hydroelectric power plant construction discontinued during the war. There I saw the head water and tail-water areas looking from the dam of the large power plant, the work of drill columns, samples of core, exposure of marl and dolomite, and large druses of quartz. . .

I have never returned to those places and do not know if the natural environment has been preserved there over the past 65 years: pine forests carpeted with reindeer moss, an abundance of mushrooms and berries, in the rivers – pikes, catfish, breams, eels, and lampreys. At that time the Soviet regime had not yet managed to destroy private homesteads in Latvia, had not yet cut down orchards in the farms, and half a year remained until the deportation of their owners to Siberia.

Geology did not last for long as my hobby. Uncle Aron moved out of our apartment on Marat Street, he devoted himself to his family, took part in expeditions, and I acquired other hobbies.

I became ingrossed in botany probably because of the mentioned above book by Tsinger. (Do you remember my description of durian?) I retained in my memory names of plants and their classification. For example I have not forgotten the appearance of the wild varieties of the cruciferous family: winter cress and caseweed. Between book pages I dried up leaves and flowers, but while studying botany at school my interest gradually changed to an aversion. I especially loathed the theory worked out by the great Russian agrologist Dokuchaev and research by Academician Williams. Even now I wince when my memory reminds me of the "fine-cloddy soil structure" and the "grass mixture of leguminous and cereal components, such as clover and timothy" while my learning by heart the six elements of the grassland agriculture resulted in the first manifestation of my absolute memory's malfunction.

My keen enthusiasm for experimental physics appeared too early, when I was 10. It blazed up like a match and died down. While following the instructions found in "Entertaining Physics" by Y. I. Perelman I took out a coin from water without wetting my fingers. Then I almost started a fire with the help of a lens, played with soap bubbles and even contrived a detector radio receiver that let out a loud crackling. But I was indifferent to physics at school in spite of my victories in

Olympiads. It was nice to receive “A”-grades, but I did not like chemistry either: the non-organic one was more or less all right, but I could not stand organic chemistry.

My love affair with astronomy continued from the fourth until the sixth grade. The paradox of infinite space often disturbed me before falling asleep; the wrinkled face of the Moon and the sight of the sky studded with stars hypnotized me and strongly excited my imagination when looking at them for a long time. Jules Vern’s “From the Earth to the Moon”, or Herbert Wells’ “The War of the Worlds” could not fail inspiring a childish interest in the mysteries of the planets. I persuaded Mom to take me to the Planetarium on Krasnaya Street not far from the Admiralty. I even began assembling a telescope following the instructions I had found in a book. But the necessary lenses could not be afforded by my Mom.

When I was in the sixth grade a City Olympiad in astronomy was organized. The future winners were promised to be awarded prizes. I tried really hard and prepared a richly illustrated manuscript “Space Travels” with a review of the topic in which I was well grounded – the book by Sternfeld was on my shelf for a long time, not without reason. (In 1951, space flight with rocket engines was of course considered possible, but the general public expected it to happen in an uncertain and comparatively distant future. A reminder, just in case: Gagarin’s flight occurred 10 years later). I sent my composition to the jury and started waiting, which was a torture with the out-and-out choleric temperament I had in those years.

Because there was no response until the end of the school year I decided to make inquiries myself at the “Palace of Pioneers”. My package was found and it was the only one – there were no other participants in the City Astronomy Olympiad, and the authorities had concluded to cancel it. I badly wanted to visit the observatory at the “Palace of Pioneers” where, I was told, one could see a real telescope, but it turned out to be impossible because of repairs: “Come back in the fall,” they invited me, but I did not come. This dénouement was oppressive enough to disillusion me in the romantic profession of astronomer. *Ad notam* to those interested: I never regretted that decision and furthermore, I was not eager any more to look at the Moon, planets, and stars through a telescope. I can also add that theoretical astronomy is essentially a part of mathematics, and empirical sciences, including experimental astronomy have never seriously attracted me in my adult life.

The history of the ancient world was taught when we were in the fifth grade. Simultaneously, I studied in detail “The Legends and Myths of Ancient Greece” by N. A. Kuhn. I was interested in ancient history, but my interest grew many years later when it became clear to me that I belonged to a nation that was the first to profess monotheism, which in its past dealt with Egyptian Pharaohs and fought against Rome. . . In the Soviet Union of 1950 Jews had no history. I don’t know whether it was introduced to the schools of the post-Soviet Russia which seems to be a logical action because this inconvenient nation has had certain ties with the Bible.

Well, isn’t it enough to talk about science again and again? Aren’t there such beautiful things as music or painting for example? They of course exist, but

unfortunately I was unable to make my contribution to these achievements of human genius because I lacked any noticeable trace of capabilities.

## 2.10 Poetry

I clearly remember that my first experience of poetic inspiration occurred when I was 8 years old and, with my Mom, was entering the gateway of House No. 17 on Suburban Avenue where my great-uncle Mark used to live before he died during the siege of Leningrad, after which his children moved into the same apartment. Here is my first rhyme: “There’s a meeting in the city and at the station there’s grandiose a demonstration.” Nothing much, but a nice feeling! I understood then that I could compose verses. Here are some lines of approximately the same period:

It’s a verse I’m writing; but can’t find a rhyme.  
I won’t be a poet, I won’t waste my time.  
No tears and no bemoaning  
That I am a bad poet.  
I will be surely published  
Because they do not know it.

As you see I early became aware of my poetic talent’s limitations simultaneously with its first manifestation, but did not stop scribbling rhymes either responding to a social order – for the school wallpaper, or at the call of the heart. Here is a sample of my landscape lyrics:

The mantle of the fog got rare.  
The giant trees now visible again  
Raised in the still and glassy air  
Their crowns already lit by then.  
And in its rays crimson and fair  
The sun is rising o’er the flowery glen,  
It soars above the ocean all aglare –  
A golden fan that challenges my pen. . .  
et cetera.

The report of my early poetic work would be incomplete without the verses inspired by love. . .

The dark pile of houses, a gloomy sight,  
The black mass of sleeping trees,  
The stars twinkling modestly at night,  
The sad moon looks down at lands and seas.  
The world is sleepy, I alone can’t sleep.  
My memory unwittingly revives  
The pages of the past I’d always keep,  
Their sweet pain is with me, it still survives.  
.....  
I am recalling. . . But why should I touch,  
In vain, a painful wound which even now is sore?  
The sky and stars go pale but not as much  
As to bring me the day they have in store.

This was how Vova Maz'ya versified his feelings when he was an eighth grader, and today, for the sake of self-justification he can repeat that he has never found comfort in illusions of his poetic capabilities.

But many years later I had a rare fortune to get a close contact with poetry spelled with a capital letter – the poems of my daughter.<sup>16</sup>

## 2.11 Fimka

There was already a chance to mention Fimka B., my friend from the first grade. We had sat at the same desk almost the whole period of attending high school, and most of that time were inseparable or what they called “hand in glove”.

At first, for several years, his classmates teased him by using the nickname “Fatty”. Now I am looking at a photo preserved from the time of the fourth grade and see his double chin which fact, in those times of semi-hunger, irritated the socium and could result in ostracism. I never thought of teasing him, but I can't give myself the credit of friendly feelings, I simply did not notice anything unusual in his appearance. From books I learned and had a good idea of what is considered a genuine men's friendship. In my opinion, the relationship between Fimka and me was exactly like that ideal. In those days my attitude to him was indeed brotherly and I had no doubt that he reciprocated that feeling.

Fimka lived on 77 Nevsky Avenue, on the corner of Pushkinskaya Street, a five minute walk from 19 Marat Street. Entering the communal apartment on the third floor I turned right and proceeded by a long dark corridor past the doors of the tenants' rooms; there I knocked at the last door on the left side and got to Fimka's room. When we were in the first grade his father had not yet been demobilized and Fimka lived together with his mother just like me. That fact evidently contributed to our friendship too, but our mothers did not have any special interest in each other and, while always keeping good relations between them, did not become friends. It was only natural: his mother Anna Solomonovna, an elegant and vivacious woman, was considerably younger than my mother and had her own young company. Besides, her husband was alive. For the celebration of the new 1946 year she invited me, of course fulfilling a wish of her son. My mother courageously insisted on my accepting the invitation though it was my birthday. “You will have a more cheerful time,” she was persuading me, and I was stupid enough to obey her.

During the celebration where the food was delicious and they did not forget to wish me a happy birthday, I suddenly realized what a mess I had made leaving

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<sup>16</sup> Gali-Dana Singer (née Maz'ya) – poetess and translator (Russian literature to Hebrew, and Israeli to Russian) was born in 1962, Leningrad. Her book of poems “Journey Beyond the Assigned Line”, M.: “New Literary Review”, 2009, was dedicated to me. In 2012, in St. Petersburg a journal of poetry “The Air” was issued honoring her, Project “Argo”, ISBN 978-5-86793-697-6. Another book by her has just been issued “Convergence points. Vanishing point”, NLR 2013, ISBN 978-5-4448-0095-9.

Mother alone. Sitting at table I could not endure it any longer and burst out crying bitterly. When asked "What's the matter?" I answered sniffing: "I pity mommy". They took me home with a package of candies for her.

Once at Fimka's, I saw his father in military uniform. I remembered that day especially vividly as it could have been the last one in my life. I sat on a couch and Fimka stood in front of me showing off his father's Walther pistol captured at war. A second earlier it had been on the table next to the holster and leather belt but suddenly got in Fimka's hands pointed at my breast. "Bang, bang!" said Fimka ready to pull the trigger, but his father managed to snatch the pistol. There was a cartridge in the charger, and the safety catch was not slipped into place. I envied Fimka for not too long because his father did not stay with his family. During the war he had met another woman and left Leningrad to be with her.

For some time Fimka lived together with his mother again and I continued coming to his place quite often. We spent evenings sitting at a chessboard or playing table games: bingo, dominoes and others, but that period soon ended. His mother remarried, and Fimka acquired a little brother. It became impossible to make prolonged visits to Fimka's house. Only the school and street were left.

One day, in the fourth grade, we were returning home from school. It was early fall, a warm and dry weather. We both had Pioneer's red neckties on. We dropped in at the ice cream parlor near the Coliseum arch, drank tomato juice in faceted tumblers having answered the question: "With salt or pepper?" and crossed Nevsky Avenue. After that our routes had to diverge: his – to the left, and mine – straight ahead, but we didn't want to part, and Fimka decided to see me off to my house. In such cases, having reached the destination we turned back and thus changing directions hung about in Marat and Nevsky between our houses for a long time.

On that day, we enthusiastically argued about human happiness while swinging our school bags. Briefly speaking, I declared that to die a happy person one needed to have lived for the sake of mankind's prosperity.

N. G. Chernyshevsky<sup>17</sup> would have been satisfied with my theory, but I did not have a chance to hear Fimka's ideas in this connection, because the man who followed us said loudly: "Look at those little Yids kicking up a din!" We quieted down and let him pass.

By the by, have you ever been punched with brass knuckles. I hope you haven't. But I once had that experience at the age of 14 as a student of the seventh grade. I am going to tell you about it.

In Fimka's apartment on 77 Nevsky Avenue I moved along the corridor towards his room. It was necessary to pass a couple of doors one of which belonged to the room occupied by a guy, Yurka S., about 2 years our elder. Using a hurtful and more modern expression, he parroted thugs, but he did not offend Fimka and told him of his adventures, some of which my friend shared with me. By that time Yurka had quit school and was studying in a technical college. He wanted to become a writer and filled up notebooks with his minute handwriting. One day, at school, after

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<sup>17</sup> N. G. Chernyshevsky (1828–1889), a Russian utopian socialist.



classes, I was going down the stairs, then opened the door leading to the lobby and stopped with my mouth wide open unable to inhale. “It took his breath away” as a poet once said.<sup>18</sup> I remember my horror and bewilderment because of a sudden pain in the chest from an unknown source, and an inability to breathe; but finally I took a breath and I tried to understand what happened. In front of me stood Fimka and Yurka. “Well, did you like it?” Yurka asked showing me a ribbed plate that was held with four fingers on the right hand. “Are you crazy?” I forced myself to say. “Well, it was a joke,” answered the future Jack London waving his brass knuckles and broadly smiling.

When the period of puberty came we began constantly taking evening walks on Broadway.<sup>19</sup> On that stretch you were guaranteed to come across some of your pals. Groups of “dudes” “toddled” from one end of “the Broad” to the other and back again trying to “pick up” cute gals. I don’t know about other boys but we could never achieve any result. Nevertheless, the romantic Broadway attracted us like a magnet.

## 2.12 The First Place in the District!

The traumatic event that happened to me when I was in the fifth grade was quite painful. I am going to talk about it now. That was an important lesson; it taught me to endure similar situations calmly as they repeated in my life. There is no way to ignore adjustments for the time period or concrete circumstances, but the main point remains the same.

Let me begin with a handwritten document attested to by a school seal.

*Character Reference regarding the fifth year Class “B” student, boys’ high school No. 215, (previously, in school No. 207, he was in Class “D”)*

*Vladimir Maz’ya*

*Maz’ya, Vladimir is an excellent student.*

*Capable and diligent. He has quick mind, and a serious attitude to his studies.*

*Takes an active part in his class activities.*

*He is a deputy chairman of the Young Pioneer unit council.*

*Has given reports at Pioneers’ meetings.*

*A good and responsive comrade.*

*Helps poor achievers and worries about their success.*

*Excellent exam grades.*

*Prepared for the exams intensively and seriously.*

<sup>18</sup> Allusion to the words from the famous fable by I. A. Krylov “The Crow and the Fox” inspired by a similarly titled fable by Aesop.

<sup>19</sup> Broadway or “the Broad” was what the Leningrad young people called a stretch of Nevsky Avenue from Vosstaniya Square to Liteyny Avenue.

*His mother has a job but finds time to watch closely  
the studies and discipline of her son.*

*Class supervisor*

*S. Kogan*

*6.7.50*

Our class supervisor Nina Vasilyevna was replaced as early as the beginning of the fourth grade by Sophiya Davidovna (with the nickname “Sophochka”), and all she had written about me was the naked truth. Of course that truth was not complete, but who expects full truth from a notebook page. Still, if anyone is eager to find a serious description of the feelings and motives of the fifth year class “B” student Vladimir Maz’ya, here is a true story for that purpose.

Like in the previous year, on one of the first days of September 1949, Sophochka supervised the election of our Pioneer “activist group”: “Chairman of the Unit Council – Slava R.; his first deputy – Vova Maz’ya, second deputy – Fima B.” she pronounced solemnly addressing the class and afterwards continued calling the names of rank and file members of the Council. “Who is in favor? Please raise your hands. Unanimous!”

Fimka and I were highly active Pioneers and the only “A” students in the class. This made our presence in Sophochka’s list inevitable. But I had a question: “For what reason is R., a “B” student, becoming the chairman of the Pioneer Unit for a second year in a row? Everybody knew well that in the past year he, being the chairman, engaged in so-called social work rather carelessly. But if I openly stated my perplexity it would sound like “Elect me!”, and I naturally kept silent. At the same time, speaking honestly, I did not believe that Supervisor Kogan would have appointed as Chairman a student with such a strange last name as Maz’ya, even though his “quick mind” were a hundred times quicker. That is why, in spite of my disappointment, I perceived the situation *cum grano salis*.

Time, abiding by its rules, healed the wounds. Before the third quarter ended, the school Young Pioneer Organizer informed us of the starting competition for the title of best Pioneer unit in the Kuibyshevsky District. We, like everybody else, were urged to take an active part in it. The criteria of success were performance at school and Pioneer work; the winning unit was promised a challenge pennant.

At that moment Vova Maz’ya’s Pioneer fervor attained an extraordinary height. He decided to transform the fifth year Class “B” so as to obtain the status of best of the best and then, at any cost, to be awarded the District Pennant. It was not really difficult to impart my enthusiasm to Fimka and some other three or four boys, thus our group was ready for action. Meanwhile the chairman of the Pioneer unit could not care less about our commotion. Evidently my venture did not appeal to him and he, so to say, opted out of it staying calm and even-tempered.

Pioneer work did not cause any problems. Vova Maz’ya, for instance, presented reports on literary and mathematical themes at the Pioneers’ meetings.

Wall papers were issued regularly. We participated in excursions to various places. I cannot remember everything but the accountability was perfect.

The most difficult task, sometimes seemingly unrealizable, was help for so-called “poorly performing” students. Coaching such students had always been

considered a duty of a real Leninist Pioneer. In the third quarter the tutoring of poor achievers reached an unheard of intensity. Every day we stayed after class with “D” and “C” students, dictated Russian language tests prepared by us ourselves, helped them to solve math problems, trained them to answer the teacher when called up to the blackboard. On the next day one of us (the tutor) would run up to the teacher and quickly suggest: “Call on N. today please. He knows everything.” The teacher did not refuse playing our game, and by the end of the quarter the performance of our students looked splendid. Not only did all of the coached students get on well at school, the number of “C” students sharply decreased.

In short, we finally received the District Pennant and hung it on the wall. Additionally, we were awarded the Challenge Red Banner of the school Pioneers’ Unit – understandably, as we had achieved the status of the best unit in the District, so much the more we became the best at our school.

I was happy! I was so happy! I had never felt such an intensive joy.

Soon we were visited by the photographer G. F. Safonov, a correspondent of “Lenin’s Sparks” and the father of one of my classmates. Several days later, on my way to school, I took out of the mailbox that day’s newspaper. The photo of our Pioneer Unit was made remarkably well. Standing first by the banner was our council chairman, after him was me, then Fimka and the rest of the pioneers of our unit. As a comment the photograph had an article in big letters with the words: “Slava R. and his friends”. My eyes searched for the name Maz’ya in vain. Shocked by the injustice, I did not go to school that day, and, besides, I must admit a loss of some illusions. All of my social enthusiasm vanished.

During the fourth quarter changes occurred in our class that cannot be called other than dramatic. Tutoring the poor achievers suddenly stopped. “D” grades returned. Before the start of classes on one of the last days of the school year, the Pioneer Organizer burst into our classroom in fury, barked something scornful at us, and took away the pennant and banner, banging the door as she left. But I did not care.

As for Slava R., he was tacitly awarded a vacation package to the legendary Crimean Pioneer resort called Artek; he told someone about it himself in the fall when the story of Challenge Pennant had sunk into the Lethe.

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