Chapter 1

Childhood

- We know your grandpa. But just who might you be?
- The two Arkady Gaidars
- Pavel Bazhov
- Cuba
- Yugoslavia
- The bookkeeper
- Summer vacation
- My favorite writer’s daughter
- That strange word “inflation”
- The invasion of Czechoslovakia
- An end to childhood

If I’m not mistaken, the first question I was asked at the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR just after my appointment as deputy prime minister of the Russian government sounded something like this: “Well, everybody knows about your grandpa. But just what are you planning to do?” Later I had to listen to endless Communist reproaches for my supposed denial of everything my grandfather Arkady Petrovich Gaidar had gone to war for, died for, everything my father, Timur Gaidar, had fought for. I can’t help but concede that the history of the country has indeed been oddly intertwined with our family history. For me, Arkady Gaidar had always seemed to exist in two different incarnations. One of these was an inseparable part of sacred Communist lore: there was the Arkady Gaidar detachment, the Arkady Gaidar *druzhina*, the Arkady Gaidar Young Pioneer Camp. At age seventeen Arkady Gaidar commanded a regiment—*Timur and His Team*.

Then there was the other Arkady Gaidar, the one I knew from stories told by my father and my grandmother, and from the books I loved. The
first was a sort of Communist saint, a knight without fear, without reproach, without doubt. The second was a talented and unhappy man, whose life was forever marked by the tragedy of revolution and civil war. This son of an Arzamas schoolteacher was thirteen years old when the tsarist regime in Russia collapsed, and cruel and troubled times set in.  

In a divided Russia, the logic of life and heritage propelled him toward the Reds. He firmly believed that the Communist idea meant a bright future for all humankind. At fourteen he went off to war; at fourteen he was wounded for the first time. Six years later, shell-shocked and gravely ill, he was discharged from the Red Army with the rank of regimental commander.

It all sounds very romantic, commanding a regiment at age seventeen. But one has to remember what civil war is. What a terrible fate and what an enormous burden lay behind all the “romance”; how many of your compatriots you yourself killed, and how many were killed by your order, albeit in the name of a cause that you thought just. My father would recall how my grandfather always refused to talk about the Civil War. Sometimes, if people really insisted, he might sing an army song from those days. A late diary entry reads, “I dream about the people I killed when I was young, in the war.” With such a childhood and such a youth, you might well turn into a misanthrope. But this man, instead, began writing amazingly bright and sunny books.

It sometimes seems to me that, indeed, adult responsibility came upon him too soon. He simply never got much chance to play. Perhaps the book of his I love best is School. And when recently I visited his native Arzamas for the first time, I came to love and understand him all the more. I can’t be objective about my grandfather’s books. In The Military Secret I see his relationship with my father, and in The Blue Cup I recognize my grandmother’s lively but rather difficult personality. Of all his books, perhaps the one I’m least fond of is Timur and His Team. Timur, after all, is such a painfully good little Communist.

I think that my grandfather, right up to his death in 1941, continued to believe in the same Communist idea for which he had gone to war at age fourteen. But with the passage of time it had become harder and
harder for him to find that idea in the images of the real Communist world that surrounded him. My father says that the greatest tragedy of all for my grandfather was the arrest of Tukhachevsky and Blyukher, military leaders he had served under during the Civil War. He could not believe that they were traitors, nor could he believe that the accusations against them were false. He came up with all sorts of fantastic ways to explain it to himself. One remarkable thing is that neither in his prose, nor in his journalistic work, nor in his radio broadcasts did he ever mention Stalin by name. I don’t know whether this was deliberate or not. What was clear was that Stalin didn’t fit into that bright picture of the world that Arkady Gaidar was ready to fight for.

My grandfather’s sense of his world was shot through with premonitions of another terrible war soon to come. And so he considered it his duty as a writer to prepare young readers for the grave trials ahead. It would be a fierce fight; they would need all their strength in the struggle against the enemy. It was no time to be wallowing in one’s own doubts, serious though they might be. Yet the closer that war came, the more yawning was the gap between what he believed and what he saw in front of him.

My father says that the war was in some sense an escape for my grandfather. It did away with any inner, psychological ambivalence; it divided the world precisely and definitively into friends and mortal enemies; it demanded clear solutions, personal courage, and a readiness to die for the cause you believed in—a readiness unclouded by any doubt over whether or not that cause was just.

My grandfather was killed in October 1941, in a skirmish between his partisan detachment and German National Socialists, the standard Russian term for whom has always been “the Fascists.” I cannot fathom how the current heirs to fascism think they can claim any right to Arkady Gaidar’s moral legacy. Nor, quite honestly, can I picture my grandfather in postwar Russia, with its oppressive atmosphere of patriotism on parade, its growing anti-Semitism, its pogroms against music and literature.

My father, Timur Gaidar, had a singular sort of childhood; it was si-
multaneously interesting and rather sad. On the one hand, he had his famous, talented, endlessly creative father, the prewar Moscow intelligentsia, friends, acquaintances from Koktebel. Among the family’s closest friends were the Shilov brothers, the sons of General Shilov and Yelena Sergeevna Bulgakova. The warmth he felt at Mikhail Bulgakov and Yeflena Sergeevna’s house was, I think, always my father’s ideal of what a home should be. On the other hand, there was his parents’ early divorce, then his stepfather’s arrest, then his mother’s.

When the war started, my father was fourteen. Like other teenagers he tried to enlist for the front. Instead came work at a defense plant, then at sixteen the naval academy, then submarine service in the Baltic. This was when the still very young and naive Lieutenant Timur Gaidar wrote a letter to the Party’s theoretical journal *Bolshevik*, requesting an explanation of why there were some discrepancies between recent statements by Stalin and Marxist fundamentals. Apparently the letter fell into the hands of someone fairly honest and courageous, or perhaps the name helped. At any rate, fortunately for the young lieutenant, nothing came of it.

By 1952, Timur Gaidar was attending classes in journalism at the Military-Political Academy, and there he met Ariadna Bazhova, a history instructor at the University of the Urals, and daughter of the famous writer Pavel Petrovich Bazhov. On the night before their wedding he professed to her that although he considered Stalin a traitor to Leninist ideals, he nonetheless believed this sacred cause would win out in the end. Picturing how difficult her life would be from now on, Mama cried, but the straitlaced Komsomol girl went ahead and married the senior lieutenant and, as far as I know, never regretted it.

Pavel Petrovich Bazhov’s life, his character, were more or less the polar opposite of Arkady Petrovich Gaidar’s. If our family inherited from the Gaidar side a taste for adventure, what it got from Pavel Petrovich was tranquil good sense, steadiness. This miner’s boy from the Urals had once upon a time approached his schoolteacher and asked for something to read. The teacher gave him the first volume of Pushkin’s collected
works and said that when he’d memorized it he could come and get volume two. After Pavel Bazhov had memorized Pushkin’s entire collected works, the teacher decided that the boy had a good head on his shoulders and deserved a patron. Later came the theological seminary, teaching, and a long-running passion for collecting the folklore of the Urals.

During the civil war, Bazhov, like Arkady Petrovich, fought on the side of the Reds. Afterward came family life, seven children, teaching, journalism. In 1938 he was expelled from the Party and summoned by the local NKVD. My grandmother, Valentina Alexandrovna, packed a small suitcase, and my grandfather set out for that all-too-familiar Sverdlovsk address. However, by that time the trail of repressions had led back to the NKVD itself, and the terrible system had begun to break down. After hours of sitting in the waiting room, Pavel Petrovich still hadn’t had his audience. Fortunately, he didn’t go looking for any higher-ups to explain to him why he’d been brought in but never questioned; instead he walked out the door, went home to 11 Chapaev Street, and didn’t go out again for a year. His sizable family lived on the teacher’s salary brought home by my grandmother’s sister, Natalya Alexandrova, and meanwhile my grandfather tended the vegetable garden and conjured over his “baby”—the enormous catalogue of folklore he had compiled during decades and decades of work.

A little more than a year after all this took place, he read my grandmother and my mother his first stories. The wave of repressions had by then begun to subside, my grandfather’s Party membership was restored, and soon he became the author of that famous collection of tales The Malachite Box.

A kaleidoscope of my first childhood memories: Cuba, of course, looms largest. I arrived there in 1962, on the eve of the Cuban missile crisis. I was six years old. My father was working as a correspondent for Pravda, and had been there during the events at Playa Girón; later he brought me and mama to join him. My memories of revolutionary Cuba are still amazingly vivid. Side by side with a still functioning, still intact Ameri-
can tourist culture you saw an unfeigned revolutionary spirit among the victors, and heavily attended demonstrations. There was singing, celebration.

My windows in the Hotel Riomar looked out directly on the Gulf of Mexico; below there was a swimming pool, and beside it an artillery battery. The building that housed diplomats and specialists from Eastern Europe was shelled periodically. Our battery would return fire. From my window I could see one slogan in yellow neon: “The motherland—or death!” And one in blue: “We will be victorious!” Our maid would put her machine gun down in one corner, then pick up her mop.

Offshore, directly opposite, there was always an American reconnaissance vessel. At the height of the missile crisis you could see a haze of smoke in the distance—the American Seventh Fleet. We had guests, friends of my father’s, Soviet military officers from the groups stationed there. Sometimes they would take me with them to the barracks and let me climb around on the tanks and armored personnel carriers. Raúl Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara both came to visit. My father took his pistol and went target shooting with Che Guevara.

Leftists from all over the world were terribly interested in Cuba and its fledgling revolution. There were quite a few journalists from socialist countries posted to Havana. The Czechoslovak Telegraph Agency was represented by a good friend of my father’s, Jaroslav Bouček. They often argued—I didn’t understand what about. But I was great friends with his children Petr and Jaroslav, who were about my age.

I remember one trip with Brian Pollitt, a British economist and son of one of the founders of the British Communist Party, and his wife Penny, in their Land Rover. We were in the northern part of Oriente, one of the wildest parts of the island, when the powerful vehicle ground to a halt, mired in swampy ground. There had been fighting in the region. My father and Brian took a pistol and went for help. They left me the other pistol, to protect the women—my mother and Penny. This was pure family tradition, and I’m convinced that my grandfather, too, would have jumped at this opportunity to give a lesson in bravery. About two
hours later they returned; they’d found a village. The villagers brought
their oxen and towed the Land Rover out, and that night we slept in a
hut under tight-woven gauze nets; the mosquitoes were terrible. I re-
member it all.

In general, in my family, cowardice, even the hint of cowardice, was
considered the deadliest sin of all. For example, when we went swim-
ning and my father dove off the high board, he suggested I do the same.
I was hardly thrilled with the suggestion. I jumped anyway and landed in
a painful belly flop, but pretended to be enjoying it all immensely.

It was there, in Cuba, that I made my first acquaintance with eco-
nomic issues. Havana had a supply problem, although at home in the ho-
tel we at least had our traditional powdered eggs for breakfast. Thank
God, my grandma had sent a whole crate of them over with an Aeroflot
crew. You couldn’t get fruit in stores unless you had ration coupons. A
hundred miles outside Havana, fruit lay rotting in heaps. You couldn’t go
get it and bring it in to sell, because that was something called “speculat-
ing.” I didn’t understand why it worked that way, and nobody could ex-
plain it to me.

Time passed, and I saw my father getting more and more irritated in
his conversations with Cuban friends; he kept talking about something
called NEP. When we got home to the hotel he complained about the
idea of “exporting revolution.” But this, too, was beyond me. I was firmly
convinced that the Soviet Union was a bulwark of peace and justice—it
was first in outer space, first in aid to all peoples struggling against impe-
réalism. My country was the best country in the world, the future be-
longed to the USSR, we stood for a just cause, and in this difficult struggle
we, and it, would finally prevail. A simple, happy, romantic world. The
main thing was to be brave, to fight on. Victory was only a matter of time.

We returned to Moscow in the fall of 1964. We kept an open house; it
was always full of guests, my father’s friends—writers, poets, journalists,
soldiers. Yaroslav Smelyakov, Daniil Granin, Yury Levitansky, David
Samoilov, Yegor Yakovlev, Grigory Pozhenyan, Yakov Akim, and Len
Karpinsky often dropped in. They let me sit in on grown-up conversa-
tions, but only as long as I didn’t interrupt. There were heated arguments about industry self-financing, about markets, market socialism, about the necessity of economic reforms and political freedoms.

In 1966, Mama and Papa and I left for Yugoslavia. Pravda was sending my father there as a correspondent. Yugoslavia in the mid-1960s was a remarkably interesting place—the only country in the world with a socialist market economy. In 1965 the political regime was essentially democratized, and now economic reforms were under way, and worker control was being introduced. What struck you there was the unheard of (by Soviet standards, anyway) abundance of goods, the frankness of social debate, the public discussion of issues on a scale that would be unthinkable at home. Belgrade was small, but a remarkably cozy and interesting city. In my Soviet school there were kids from Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, East Germany, Cuba, and Mongolia. It was a truly international children’s club, where we all took a great deal of interest in one another and in what was going on in our respective countries. Here, for the first time, I began to pay attention to the economic news, to sort out the problems the Yugoslav reforms were encountering.

Yugoslavia is also a chess-playing country, and chess became a big part of my life. I had begun playing at six, and living there gave me the opportunity to meet some of the leading players of the time. Spassky, Petrosyan, Smyslov, Bronstein, Taimanov, and Tal all visited our house. I got to watch them play speed chess. Suetin and Taimanov even indulged me, a little boy, in a game or two. I joined a junior chess team sponsored by a Yugoslav company called “Rad.” My passion for chess lasted right up to my second year at the university, when I realized that the game was distracting me from a more serious passion—economics.

There’s a phenomenon called “juvenil hypermemory,” which means an unusually highly developed memory in children. My grandfather Pavel Petrovich had something of the sort, and now I see it in my younger son. He remembers anything and everything, it doesn’t matter—numbers out of the telephone book, the multiplication tables, grain-yield statistics that just happen to be on my desk. Apparently I used to do the same thing. At some point I noticed how easy it was for me to remember
the contents of some Yugoslav statistical yearbook I’d just been leafing through, or the contents of a textbook I’d happened upon. It was a terribly convenient talent to have in school and in college. When this ability begins to fade—around age twenty—you feel as if you’ve lost an arm or a leg, as if the operating memory in your computer has suddenly crashed.

My father, who like his father before him was rather careless about his finances, always felt burdened by having to do accounts or keep books. When he noticed how easily everything involving figures seemed to be for me, he saddled me, a ten-year-old boy, with the job of composing the monthly financial report for the newsdesk. It’s quite possible that this, too, influenced my choice of profession, at least to some extent.

At the time, though, I was crazy about the sea, and was convinced that my future was in the navy, that I would live a naval officer’s life. Nothing, thought I, could possibly be more interesting than that.

During summer vacation I was usually shipped off to stay either with my grandmother Valentina Alexandrovna at Pavel Petrovich’s house in Sverdlovsk, or with my other grandmother, Lia Lazarevna, who rented a dacha outside Zvenigorod, in the village of Dunino. It was a beautiful place. No wonder Mikhail Mikhailovich Prishvin, someone who knew and appreciated Podmoskove, chose this particular village to live in. Our little house was right next to his.7

The Bazhov house in Sverdlovsk had a cosy air, and it was obvious that a large and happy family lived there. That family is scattered now, leaving only two of its members behind, my grandma and my beloved elder brother Nikita, whom I used to supply with contraband—that is, Cuban cigars. I’ve changed apartments countless times in my life since then, but that wooden building on Chapaev Street, and the garden my grandfather planted around it, may feel the most like home.

Dunino was a happy place—it was noisy, full of children, good friends who were to stay friends for years. It was there I met my first love—Masha, of the huge mysterious eyes. The Strugatsky brothers were incredibly popular in those days.8 Masha, who was Arkady Natanovich Strugatsky’s daughter, was embarrassed by all their celebrity and hid the
fact that she was related to them. Later, three years into our friendship, I
was genuinely amazed to discover that one of my favorite writers was ac-
tually her father. My passionate feelings, however, interested her not in
the least. If I interested her at all, it was only as a sort of phenomenon—
someone you could hit with a question about, say, the 1965 rice harvest,
or steel production in Luxembourg in 1967, and get the right answer.

Years later, we were reacquainted—each of us with other lives, not
particularly successful marriages, children, behind us. Masha and I were
married, and of all the families I’ve seen in my life, ours might be the
happiest. It’s only lately that Masha sometimes laments that when she
married Pavel Petrovich Bazhov’s steady and reliable grandson, she
wasn’t expecting any Arkady Gaidar style escapades.

Arkady Natanovich Strugatsky and I later became friends. I think that
he took to me not so much as Masha’s husband, but simply as an inter-
esting person; the original approach to the economic situation in one of
my articles had appealed to him. He himself always struck me as a para-
doxical combination of political naïveté and intuition far in advance of
what seemed humanly possible, with an ability to forecast situations well
into the future. In the 1970s a legend circulated among Strugatsky fans
that the two brothers were really extraterrestrials sent down to infiltrate
earth civilization. I have to say that spending time with Arkady Natano-
vich didn’t completely disabuse me of that idea. But I’m getting a little
ahead of myself.

Back then the Strugatskys really were something more that simply
writers to me. There was Monday Starts on Saturday, It’s Hard Being a
God, The Inhabited Island, and so many others. These books in many
ways shaped my world, my standards of behavior, my goals in life. It
might seem funny, but I really do remember quite exactly that after read-
ing the concluding section of The Inhabited Island, I firmly resolved to
sort out economics and the causes of inflation. The Traveler says to Mak-
sim, “Do you understand that there’s inflation in this country? Do you
even understand what inflation is?” I didn’t want to be a dunce; I wanted
to figure it all out. That was when, for the first time, I began to search out
books on economics.
The summer of 1968 I spent in Dunino, and followed the newspaper stories about developments in Czechoslovakia. On the morning of August 21, I heard something about a letter from an unnamed group of Czech leaders, and about the “international aid” being provided to Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops. The blatant falsehood of the official version, the wrongness of what was going on, was so obvious, even to a small boy. What sort of nonsense was this? West German troops preparing for an invasion of Czechoslovakia? And what sort of truth has to be brought in with tanks and troop carriers?

The cozy, familiar world of my childhood—where everything was so right and clear, where we had a fine and noble idea, a beautiful country, clear-cut goals—began to crack and crumble. My childhood was suddenly over.