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## THE TRAIL

The dramatic publication in 1962 of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* catapulted an obscure Russian schoolteacher and writer into the international spotlight. That work, however, marks not the beginning but the continuation of a long period of secretive literary activity that had begun in prison, camp, and exile and that intensified after Solzhenitsyn's return to "freedom" in 1956. It is to these early writings that one must turn to appreciate the genesis of his remarkably multifaceted intellectual and literary project. Of these, the narrative poem *Dorozhen'ka* (*The Trail, The Road, The Way*) most fully conveys the arduous path that eventually led to Solzhenitsyn's radical and definitive break with communism.

*The Trail* is an autobiographical poem of more than 7,000 lines published in Russian in 1999. Its author composed the poem between 1947 and 1952 under the worst of circumstances: as a prisoner of the Soviet state and without the benefit of pen and paper. As he composed the poem, he memorized it using techniques so unforgettably described in the third volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*. Utilizing a specially devised rosary as a mnemonic device, Solzhenitsyn was able to accumulate no fewer than 12,000 lines of verse during his time in a Special (Labor) Camp. This remarkable feat of memorization was a heroic effort on Solzhenitsyn's part to hold on to those experiences that crucially shaped him in the six years leading up to his arrest and incarceration in February 1945.

The autobiographical main character Sergei Nerzhin begins his odyssey as a true believer of such intensity that he awakens early on each day of his honeymoon to read Karl Marx. Nerzhin's rigid convictions largely blind him to the perversities of the ideological world that envelops the lives of every Soviet

citizen. But in *The Trail* Solzhenitsyn mightily struggles to come to terms with his past. He forthrightly confronts those intimations of reality that somehow managed to break into his youthful world of illusions. In the opening chapter, Solzhenitsyn describes a canoe journey that he and a friend took along the Volga River in 1939. These two “Boys from the Moon” were oblivious to the evidence of inhuman forced labor and collectivization that was all around them. In the second chapter (“Honeymoon”), Nerzhin and his new bride come across a trainload of condemned zeks, an encounter that has a powerful, if temporary, impact on this committed Marxist. In later chapters, Solzhenitsyn describes encounters with Vlasovites, Russian soldiers who out of desperation and despair chose to fight with the dreaded German enemy rather than to help sustain a monstrous Soviet regime. Gradually these experiences left their cumulative mark on Solzhenitsyn/Nerzhin, although they did not lead to any immediate break with Sovietism. What Solzhenitsyn needed was a dramatic catalyst to open his eyes fully to the surreal world around him. This catalyst finally arrived in the form of his arrest at the front and his dazed return to Russia as a prisoner (events described in detail in chapters ten and eleven of *The Trail*).

The excerpt that follows is chapter five (“Besed”) of *The Trail*. Together with chapter nine (“Prussian Nights”), it is the only part of *The Trail* to have been translated into English. It takes its name from a river and village in Belarus where Solzhenitsyn saw action during his military service in World War II. Everything in this chapter happened exactly as described. A hauntingly lyrical description of the austere Belarusian countryside (“this infertile and forsaken land”) begins this chapter. The countryside’s peaceful “silence” contrasts quite strikingly with the noise and clamor of the advancing Red Army. The poem as a whole is marked by a startlingly complex rhyme/meter scheme and varying line lengths that create a true polyphony among themselves. With a remarkably dense and energetic style, Solzhenitsyn captures the tense drama of the front, where his artillery unit was pounded day and night from the air and ground by German forces.

There’s no log, no stump, no rounded scrap of wood  
To close up the trench, above your head.

## The Trail: “Besed”

Called in for consultations with his commanders, Lieutenant Nerzhin witnesses a rear thoroughly disconnected from the harsh realities of the front. This sempiternal disconnect between front and rear is reinforced and amplified by the lies and propaganda that define “official” Soviet reality. Nerzhin is then invited to witness the execution of an alleged collaborator. He is revolted by the almost mirthful atmosphere that surrounds the execution, one worthy of some victory celebration. His reaction to the execution is a *moral* one, that of a decent, civilized human being and not that of an ideologue who relishes the destruction of an “enemy of the people.” The grotesque, hideous suffering of the hanged man made a deep impression on Solzhenitsyn. So, too, did the extraordinary undulating of the German “Frame” bomber—would she bomb or not bomb those gathered for the execution? These experiences reinforced Solzhenitsyn’s growing sense that there is a higher Meaning, or Fate, above us. Invited to stay the night for the revelries that were to follow the execution, a disillusioned Nerzhin instead opts “to trek into the hell of bridgehead night.” His final cry of solidarity with the executed Nikolayev reveals that Solzhenitsyn/Nerzhin’s capacity for moral evaluation has not been wholly obliterated by Marxist dogmatism.

Solzhenitsyn did not have the opportunity to write down the immense mass of *The Trail* until the summer of 1953, when he was in exile in Central Asia. His herculean efforts to confront his past, to defy his totalitarian masters through critical self-examination, and to preserve the memories that risked being lost forever can only compel admiration. *The Trail* describes the path of suffering and enlightenment that allowed Solzhenitsyn to become the mature and self-aware writer that we know. The same indomitable will that allowed Solzhenitsyn to survive imprisonment, cancer, and years of persecution is evident in this powerful testimony to a key stage in a great writer’s spiritual evolution.

## Chapter 5

### “Besed”<sup>1</sup>

*... to reinstate hard labor, and capital  
punishment through hanging.*  
(From a decree of the Presidium of the  
Supreme Soviet, April 1943.)

Was not born there, nor had called it home.  
And will never visit there again.  
Yet my heart adopted as its own  
This infertile and forsaken land. . . .  
Swamps. And woods. No way for wheat to grow. 5  
Fields—nowhere. Hard to raise tomatoes.  
Sands and silt and wetlands cold and low,  
Only rye and taters.  
On the hillocks—gray, unmoving, still, and silent windmills,  
In the pastures—yellow flowers shorn of all sweet scent, 10  
Churches all beheaded . . . sorry shacks’ foundations dismal . . .  
Brushwood crossings . . . bridges rotten, wasted, bent. . . .  
Tursk, Chechersk, and Zhlobin, and Sviatoye . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Besed [pronounced “BAY-set”]: The name of both a river and a village in Belarus, where Solzhenitsyn’s sound-ranging battery unit fought during autumn 1943, and where the action of this chapter takes place.

The Trail: “Besed”

Rogachiov . . . Madory<sup>2</sup> . . .  
There’s a piece of me I know I left there— 15  
Something that will come again to me no more.  
Ever for a long march on the ready,  
Service I compelled, and service did I give.  
So light-headed, thoughtless, free, in future  
I would never live. 20  
We retreat—I’m sullen; we attack—I’m happy;  
From my flask I draw, and fight with soul.  
Vishenki. Shiparnia. Rudnia-Shliagi.  
Besed. Zaboloty. Sverzhen. Ola.  
Fear, and laughter, and a soldier’s simple death . . . 25  
Dnepr and Sozh. Berezina and Drut.  
There’s a something there I know I left—  
Now it’s moot. . . .

Flowing toward the rapid, murky Sozh,  
’Tween the aspen saplings on its banks, 30  
During autumntime both cold and fine,  
Slowly-running Besed cools without a ripple,  
As a placid lake without a current.  
Yellow-crimson trees that line its shores  
Lean their branches half the way across. . . . 35  
During quiet weather,  
Lightly, as a feather,  
One can hear the leaves swoon down and drop. . . .  
It is well to sneak here, to the realm of silence,  
To spy a squirrel, hear a mouse’s rustle; 40

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<sup>2</sup> Turusk, Chechersk, etc.: Names of other towns, villages, and rivers in the same area of Belarus.

Also well to burst in here upon a steed,  
 Branches biting, hooves in yellow leaves,  
 To scare out a long-eared frightened hare,  
 “Hey-hey-hey!” to holler in pursuit.  
 We, however, plowed into these dozing woods 45  
 With the rowdy, reckless brandishing of army axes,  
 With the snakelike hissing of *katyushas*,<sup>3</sup>  
 With the din of cannons, with our engines’ roar.  
 From Desna we thrust some hundred miles,  
 Setting up a bridgehead past the river Sozh, 50  
 Having crossed, we handed over Besed village  
 To the staffers, writers, commissars.

Rough, that bridgehead at Yurkovichi-Sherstin.  
 Many boys we left there in its wake,  
 Near its aspen saplings quickly felled, 55  
 Near its houses, laid to utter waste.  
 Mines would rip our only bridge, our only flimsy  
 Artery. . . .  
 Every day we straightened and attacked full-bore  
 Only to dank burrows to retreat. 60  
 In the dark of autumn night, cut off from our army,  
 We were beaten, pushed, and pressured into that black river—  
*Operation to expand the bridgehead!*—  
 Who can understand your anguish and your fear?  
 All the land lies open, dead, disfigured, torn in craters . . . 65  
 All’s dug up, all, all that can be dug,  
 There’s no log, no stump, no rounded scrap of wood

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<sup>3</sup> *Katyusha*: a multi-barreled vehicle-mounted rocket launcher widely used by the Soviet Army in World War II.

The Trail: “Besed”

To close up the trench, above your head.  
Day and night they pound, they pound, they pound  
Our human mass, 70  
And not one stray missile will lie down and  
Pass. . . .  
Ashen, pallid faces in red clay;  
Ground’s too wet—our shovels cannot shape it.  
Trapped here! What a sorry, wretched piece of turf, 75  
Little more than one square mile of earth.  
We are pecked and pecked from planes above,  
We’re cut down, cut down by heavy mortars,  
When the *sixes*<sup>4</sup> hiss and hiss, the *squeakers*<sup>5</sup> bark and bark—  
Hug the ground! These, too, are aimed at us! . . . 80  
Day and night our sappers<sup>6</sup> patch the bridge,  
And our signalmen in water catch their cables  
While the Germans pour it, pour it on the bridge,  
And there trickles from the bridge a pinkish water. . . .  
Once the lines are patched, then from the Mainland<sup>7</sup> 85  
Pour and pour all cuss words known to man:  
“Are ya stuck, ya  
No-good mucking sacks?  
Every single officer and every soldier  
MUST! A!!—TTACK!!!” 90

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<sup>4</sup> *Six*: a six-barreled German mortar.

<sup>5</sup> *Squeaker*: a heavy German mortar with a highly distinctive sound.

<sup>6</sup> Sapper: A military engineer who specializes in sapping and other field fortification activities, or who lays, detects, and disarms mines.

<sup>7</sup> Mainland: soldier slang for a land area temporarily secure from the enemy.

One time, I was in a slit,<sup>8</sup> on drenched wet straw,  
 Chewing mindlessly upon a stem of stalk,  
 Was it even I, who lost all train of thought,  
 Could not hear the shelling: soft? or loud?  
 Could not see; what was it: dark? or light? 95  
 My whole being was a hollow,  
 And I knew I couldn't change a thing.  
 I went numb, and neither past nor home could I recall,  
 Just I chewed and chewed and chewed upon this tube-like stalk of  
 Straw, 100  
 Suffocated, drowsy, overcome.  
 Suddenly, a soldier leaning over:  
 Comrade senior battery commander! You are  
 Summoned. To battalion H.Q.<sup>9</sup>  
 What H.Q.? H.Q.? . . . Ah, yes, H.Q., gosh darn it! 105  
 Somewhere there are people living? Let them live, but  
 Let us be as well. Devil take you, BatCom:<sup>10</sup>  
 Want me to climb out and drive right to the shelling? . . .  
 Hey, how goes our bridge? It can't be  
 Whole?! 110  
 Look'ee here! *The Russian fights with style.*  
 Just a year ago you never saw  
 Such an orderly efficient crossing:  
 Horses—Hey! and drivers—Go! No crowding.  
 From the right bank to the left, from left to right, 115  
 Soldiers we still have in Mother Russia!  
 To the left bank like the wind now take us  
 Up and out.

<sup>8</sup> Slit: a tiny, narrow trench just big enough to hold one person.

<sup>9</sup> H.Q.: headquarters.

<sup>10</sup> BatCom: battalion commander.



The Trail: “Besed”

Now I'm glad to go, if only for an hour  
To be summoned from that blackened pit of wrath;                   120  
    Breathing deeply the true air of life,  
    Quietly I rode along a forest path.  
    All moved freely here; the forest bubbled.  
Just in case, the dugouts were protected doubly,  
    Trebly, even by six tiers of timber decking.                   125  
Drivers were the first, as always, to grow hasty—  
Parked their trucks but slightly down the ramps for safety,  
    Leaving their rear wheels exposed to shrapnel.  
    R.A.P.'s,<sup>11</sup> stores, stables—every inch is taken!  
Thinning out the forest, trees were cut and felled,                   130  
Tractors dragged them to the dugout excavations,  
    Soldiers fired up their field kitchens,  
    Started to heat up a field bath,  
    Battery of cannons took its firing position,  
Battery of howitzers shot full-blast from a meadow,                   135  
    Vodka was passed out amongst a giddy bevy—  
    There peeped out, and hid again from battle,  
    Only the brave generals' O.P.<sup>12</sup>  
It's amazing, how it is: you come here from the rear—  
    Seems like frontlines here,   140  
    Look how close, how near!  
    There's no life worth living,  
    There's no light worth seeing.  
Should you come here from the front, however—  
    What deep   145  
    Rear!

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<sup>11</sup> R.A.P.: regimental aid post.

<sup>12</sup> O.P.: observation post.

Besed's buried under drifts of sand so gray.  
 People, horses, trucks—no house, no hut has vacancy to stay.  
 Radio stations and repair shops—bombings can't dislodge them!—  
     Jammed into the baths and jammed into the barns.                   150  
     White-coat girls, from the medical battalion,  
         Flit along the street, no dallying:  
     She is rarely modest (tasting willingly—  
 Or unwillingly?—a soldier's true and bitter plight),  
     Rather—vulgar, sassy, spoiled by caresses,                   155  
     On her head a modish hat cocked to the side.  
     From beyond the Sozh—the din of battle,  
         As the tired cannons pounded, rattled.  
 Meek and dim and faint and low above the earth  
     Slid the autumn sun and gave no warmth.                   160  
     Once inside H.Q., I see the drapes are starched;  
 Coarse cloth runners lying on the floors; a clock that strikes;  
     On the wall—four placards: two of Stalin. Also:  
     "Daddy! Kill a German!"; "Don't forgive and don't forget!"  
     Clerks were writing softly, squeaky-neat.                   165  
 When I entered, someone muttered: "Welcome . . . health . . ."  
     "So, how goes it, eagles?"—"Poorly."—"Why?"—"S.U. gun.<sup>13</sup>  
     Every night it *hurls*, and we know no rest."  
     . . . As prescribed, the BatCom chewed me out:  
     "Here's the thing . . . before . . . I didn't . . . call you out . . .   170  
 Thought, with your experience . . . laid my hopes . . . that you'd make out. . .  
     Nighttime brought a hit! the corps itself!! H.Q.!!!  
     Who??—don't know?!—at least make up a lie or two. . . .  
     Now I can't name any targets for the higher ranks. . . .  
     What in heck you doing there, up on that river bank?           175

<sup>13</sup> S.U. gun: self-propelled gun.

The Trail: “Besed”

Somehow I don’t see a keen *artillery style*.  
You may go.” I’m through the door, but there’s the J.P.O.:<sup>14</sup>  
“*Oberleutenant*,<sup>15</sup> good health! Why aren’t you shaven clean?  
Take some papers, brochures, pass them round, explain.  
Oh, and did you run the propaganda chat, 180  
    ‘*Death for death and blood for blood*?  
    These citations are no good,  
    Some are long, and some are cut too short,  
    You had best re-do them, I am sorry:  
Get them back to me by dinnertime tomorrow. 185  
    Rybakov’s heroics you too clearly indicate,  
    Ivanov’s heroics are too standard-boilerplate.”  
One more step, but here’s the J.L.O.:<sup>16</sup> “I want some proof!  
How’d you lose three carbines in the river? What’d they,  
    Vanish—poof? 190  
    And your petrol?  
Did you not use up five times your weekly ration?!  
    A precise accounting you’d best fashion!  
You think Moscow brooks excuses? What, your pay’s too high?  
We’ll withhold times twelve-point-five, and hang you dry!” 195  
    Then the *partorg*<sup>17</sup> grabs me by the arm: “Inform me,  
    Are your men *applying*?<sup>18</sup> By the way, how come now  
    Don’t I see your name?  
    What a poor exemplar!  
    Shame, you 200  
    Officer!”  
Junior chief of staff says, “Take these Army orders. Get to

<sup>14</sup> J.P.O.: junior political officer.

<sup>15</sup> *Oberleutenant*: a playful use of the German term for Senior Lieutenant.

<sup>16</sup> J.L.O.: junior logistics officer.

<sup>17</sup> *Partorg*: Communist Party organizer.

<sup>18</sup> *Applying*: i.e., to join the Communist Party.

Know them—they're important. Very. Take your time."  
 S.C.O.<sup>19</sup> asks, "What about your gas masks? Better?"  
 And the doctor, "Baths? Lice? Hygiene? Grime?" 205  
 I've served long enough—what's asked of me is clear:  
     I salute, I listen—but don't hear.  
     Anyway, I'll do it how I think I ought,  
     While they'll write it up the way they want.  
 Not my first day in the army—well I know the deal. 210  
 If you dispatch me to heaven, I'll just click my heel:  
     "Shall I leave straightway?" Says the chief of staff,  
 "Tarry, spend the night; why rush? There's straw-stalk in your hair. . . .  
     Halt, unwind—or have you got a fine young lass,  
         In your soldier's lair?" 215  
 On my shoulder placed his hand, and asked with pleasure:  
     "To a proper execution, Nerzhin, have you ever  
         Been? . . ."

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Where the village street came to an end,  
 Where the fir-grove clustered—there, hard by the fresh-felled post 220  
 There now waded through the deep sand to attend, an  
     Idle watchers' host.  
 Corporals, lieutenant-colonels, captains, majors,  
 Privates, sergeants—girls and boys not much beyond teenagers,  
     SMERSH men,<sup>20</sup> doctors, staffers from H.Q., 225  
 Local women in their headscarves; passing guardsmen watching too.

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<sup>19</sup> S.C.O.: senior chemical warfare officer.

<sup>20</sup> SMERSH: the Soviets' frightening abbreviation for their dread World-War-II-era military intelligence: SMERt SHpionam (Death to Spies).

The Trail: “Besed”

Simple, basic is the high place that’s made ready,  
All is steady:  
Roughly hewn, still brown-striped, stands the post of virgin pine,  
At its top—a beam, a hook, some twine. 230  
Right at five there drove up from the rear  
By the brushwood road a nimble “Willys,”<sup>21</sup>  
Carrying two colonels; coming near,  
They walked out and stood right in the middle.  
Both displayed on epaulettes the thin stripes of the law: 235  
One—a shortish Jew, and one—a blunt-nosed Slav.  
Playing with the holster of his pistol,  
“Bring him over here!”—the short one squealed shrilly.  
From the retinue emerged two gunners nimbly,  
And they flung the massive barn door open widely, briskly. 240  
Brought him. Dressed at random, in civilian clothes.  
Half-asleep still. There is straw in his disheveled hair, all tousled.  
Hands are tightly tied behind his back. He looks perplexed and puzzled.  
People whisper: “German?” No—our own.  
Fixed his gaze upon the throng; then, hobbling past the guards on show,  
He drew near on even, languid feet.  
“No one’s read his sentence. . . .” “He knows nothing. . . .” “*Does not know!* . . .”  
Then unfurled the short colonel a small sheet,  
Rearranged with caution the matte shoulder-belt  
Of his foppish purse. 250  
Then a sergeant with a thick red neck  
Fetched a stool, and set it underneath the post.  
In unnatural pose, with hands behind his back,  
Having hung his head, cast down his drooping eyes,  
The accused assumed that stance of shabby actors, 255  
Which shouts “guilty” to the gallery’s greedy eyes.

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<sup>21</sup> Willys was the brand name used by Willys-Overland Motors, best known for their production of Jeeps.

Torn-up trousers, and a grimy sullied shirt;  
 Did he hear? not hear? the judge's mumbled burring—  
     "By the verdict of the Soviet Union  
 Quorum . . . judge . . . divisional . . . tribunal . . ." 260  
     Could they find no other, better, reader?!  
 Quickly he spat out some words like seeds,  
     Trapping other words behind his lips:  
     "Nikolayev . . . traitor . . . to his country . . .  
     Having . . . by the German occupiers . . ." 265  
     Timid women, reckless brave lieutenants  
 Huddled, hung on every word, as taut as wire.  
 Gilding the red death-post with its final rays,  
     Sank the setting yellow sun behind the Sozh.  
     Thundering not two miles away, beyond the forest, 270  
 Solo-engine Junkers<sup>22</sup> dove and bombed in shuddering waves,  
     Taking turns, they dashed to blast the river crossing.  
 Higher up, above them all—sure and swift and light—  
     Yakovlevs<sup>23</sup> and Messerschmitts<sup>24</sup> did  
                     Fight, 275  
     And, in searing smoke and smouldering ruin downed,  
     Wounded planes fell to the ground.  
     Anti-aircraft guns shot from the river,  
     Pounding at the Junkers, missing badly,  
     Flakes of white explosions blazing, flaring upward madly. 280  
 . . . Heck, right now our sappers, drenched to bone, in shivers,  
     Try to stop the fallen, drifting beams as best they can.  
     And yet no one, no one bends his mind to them.  
     "By decree of April . . . section number . . . put to death . . ."

<sup>22</sup> Junkers was a famous German aircraft manufacturer.

<sup>23</sup> Yakovlev (Yak) was a famed line of Russian fighter aircraft.

<sup>24</sup> Messerschmitt was another famous German aircraft manufacturer, known primarily for its World-War-II-era fighter aircraft.

The Trail: “Besed”

No one looks above, where, gliding to the zenith, 285  
Through the blinding, light-drenched sunset sky,  
Paused and froze above us (whence she came?)  
Focke-Wulf One Hundred Eighty-Nine—the  
*Frame*.<sup>25</sup>

No, the guards do see her. Now she’s noticed by a 290  
Staffer. Then a second, third, a fifth, a sixth  
Throws his head back, listening no longer; and another,  
More, and more—and now the whole big crowd.  
Someone shifted from the center to the side for cover,  
Someone else instinctively ducked down. 295  
Silence fell, no further was the sentence read.  
Tense with hope, the one who’ll die raised up his head,  
Bidding that his judges die with him together. . . .  
She’s a thorough watchman. Effortlessly could she  
Scrutinize our herd, to whom her eye was tethered, 300  
Scoping every speck.  
Would she  
Bomb us to a wreck?  
And there was, there was a soundless minute:  
Scales swayed in judgment: who shall die?— 305  
As if this were settled not by men, not here, but  
In the sky.  
Was it that its payload was inopportune then?  
Or it saved its bombs for use another day?  
Leaving in effect “By verdict of the Union,” 310  
That Frame shifted, budged—and slid away.  
All exhaled. Then softly started moaning  
The accused, and lowered down his gaze,

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<sup>25</sup> The Focke-Wulf FW-189 was a twin-engine, three-seat tactical reconnaissance aircraft. It came to be known as the “Frame” because of its distinctive open-frame design, clearly visible even from the ground.





The Trail: “Besed”

That he lived through on that post. 345  
His unclosing eyes filmed over and stopped shifting lively—  
His mouth froze in spasming, trembling state,  
Then—there was no more to Nikolayev,  
Nothing but a rigid dorsal plate.  
Right side, left side—each without a rudder, 350  
Now a leg would jolt, and now a shoulder shudder,  
Like a puppet on invisibly pulled strings,  
Like a lifeless frog on voltage springs,  
An unheard-of dance, a wild dance he  
Danced away, and—done. . . . 355

“What’s the matter, Nerzhin, what’s the haste? . . .  
Spend the night here with us!” — “I must go. It’s six.”  
Sinking in the sticky sandy gluey marsh,  
People scattered noiselessly, in utter hush.

Stay the night here? Takes some getting used to. 360  
Best to trek into the hell of bridgehead night.  
Nikolayev! Why do you stay silent?!?  
Why won’t you cry out? . . .