



Yuri Shcherbak

THE LAW OF PRESERVATION OF GOOD

The buses were lined up on the parking lot in front of the Institute. I began counting them: it came out to seven and a half – the front part of one was hidden by a concrete wall. There should have been more. I knew for sure, because at the trade union committee they said yesterday evening that an order was placed for twelve buses. The drivers had to yet discarded their summertime habit: they had parked the buses under the trees in the hole-riddled shades of autumn, but the October sun was no longer giving off warmth, radiating only a cold transparency. The people, however, did not seek the shade: on the contrary, they had clustered in motionless groups in the sunshine. No voices came from there, and the movement of the people seemed to be in slow motion. Perhaps for the first time I noticed that so many trees were growing in front of the Institute – a genuine oxygen factory covered with rust and so boringly alike in its withering, although the trees here were different: oak, linden, maple. I decided against walking in through the main entrance – today the gravely solemn portal seemed to be invincibly hostile – and made for the backyard of cluttered crates with black umbrellas stenciled on them. At the back entrance of the Institute I saw a motorcycle lying on the ground. I bent down and swiped a finger across the hot dust-covered gas tank, leaving a red stripe that reminded me of unripe cherries in May. After walking up a narrow stairway, I entered the chemical laboratory where everything was scattered around and left behind carelessly as if there had been a sudden evacuation: a switched-on shaker was moving to and fro a long row of retorts subjecting some unknown brown liquids to the tortures of mixing. At last I looked into the conference hall, but for my short height I could not see anything but a compressed mass of backs and napes. In the center of the hall floodlights were ablaze, a movie camera was whirring, and an invisible procession was shuffling along. Somebody touched my shoulder – it was Karlov-Tereshchenko. As always, he was his usual self: dressed in an unbuttoned leather jacket, a motorcyclist's crash helmet – his "brain depot," as he called it – in his hands. The "brain depot" had YAMAHA lettered on it in orange and blue.

Karlov-Tereshchenko pulled me to the lobby; we walked through a corridor with drifting tobacco smoke clinging in spooky threads to the fluorescent lamps, and reached the reading room that connected with the conference hall. Its oak armchairs of the 19th century were pushed aside, a bronze bust of Voltaire was turned around to face the windows giving on to the roofs of the buses on which the leaves were reluctant to stay put. At first I could not make out the faces of the people that had gathered there – they were so much alike, concentratedly detached, as if in a long subway passage with illuminated vaults where all were gripped by the only desire to traverse this closed space as quickly as possible. The people standing here greeted one another in

the same way as well – with curt silent nods. Wiping the sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief, the Vice President of the Academy of Sciences walked out of the conference hall with the unnaturally steady gait of a person who wears a corset. He screwed up his eyes. Everyone was looking at him, he looked round helplessly, then a woman research assistant from the Department of Air walked up and helped him take the red-and-black band off his left arm. She had black, somewhat bluish-gray eyes: at one time she had worked in the Department of Earth and gained fame for using a bluish-pearl lipstick. The worried Director of the Institute hurried after the Vice President.

"We knew about it, but still it happened so unexpectedly," said the Vice President. "It's something you'll never get used to. Our dachas are next to each other, he phoned me at two after midnight, and I rushed over in just what I had on, in pajamas..."

The Institute Director was nodding mournfully, while Karlov-Tereshchenko had already sidled up to the assistant researcher. He got the armband the Vice President had been relieved of just a while ago. Biting her lip, she carefully pinned the band to Karlov-Tereshchenko's arm. He had raised his arm like in a military salute and, as usual, was clowning, asking her not to pierce the hide of his jacket sleeve, since it was as dear to him as his own hide.

"You could've at least left your helmet somewhere else," she said, discontented, not sharing his passion for humor and irony.

Karlov-Tereshchenko walked up to Voltaire undecidedly with a look that seemed to be gauging whether the crash helmet would fit Voltaire's head, then he backed away a couple of steps (Voltaire retaining his incisive and triumphant smile), and put the YAMAHA helmet on the green cloth of the large table exactly where Academician Moroz, or simply the Old Man, liked to work. It came to my mind then that the Japanese "brain depot" would have been too small for the head of the Old Man. I walked up to the research assistant and offered my right hand, but she, moving her forefinger as if counting out someone in a blind man's buff, quickly raised my right arm. After picking an armband out of the little pile on the table, she began to pin it on. The passion for bluish-pearly hues was in her blood – but now she applied that color not to her lips, but her eyelids.

The required preparations completed at last, Karlov-Tereshchenko and I took up our places at the end of the line. In front of us stood about thirty, forty people: Karlov-Tereshchenko began expounding in a whisper his visions of the line from the viewpoint of cybernetics: an unsystematic bunch of people possessed by a certain purpose surprisingly quickly turning into a self-regulating mechanism with feedforward and feedback and capable of decision-making. The red-and-black armbands equalized everyone standing ahead of us and united us into a single orderly column moving slowly and patiently toward the high oak doors. Every three minutes the doors opened, letting four people into the hall. Those who came out of the conference hall passed us in an alienated and strenuous way like some ravens flying over a cold field of winter wheat, bringing in their wake the smell of asters and pine needles. They took off their funereal armbands and parted company to take up their place in the corners of the reading room. Ever new people arrived, and now Karlov-Tereshchenko and I greeted them in the same manner we had been greeted erewhile – with curt silent nods; now we felt like full-fledged denizens of the line.

I recalled just then what the Old Man's words when he returned the manuscript of my monograph: "Write briefly and precisely so that your words and thoughts could be chiseled on a tombstone. If out of this manuscript five or six aphorisms could be selected to adorn your tombstone and you won't be ashamed of them even a hundred years after your death, that will

mean that you've written a great book." On seeing my surprised look, the Old Man smiled sadly. "Well, five or six would be too much," he said. "Write at least one, as terse and brilliant as $E=mc^2$." I recalled the Old Man's books and tried to guess which of his aphorism would adorn his tombstone? The opening lines of his fundament *The Architecture of Clouds*? Or the words from the fifth chapter of the world-famous *Dialectics of the Wind*? Or perhaps the last sentence of his book *Weather Modeling and the Future of Mankind*? I was reflecting about the clouds when you fly above them at five o'clock in the morning at an altitude of ten thousand meters, feeling like a lonely heavenly Shepherd guarding a herd of white sheep, their fleece changing into ash-gray and rosy hues. I rose still higher, as the Old Man taught me, to the altitude of a meteorological satellite, and from an altitude of 240 kilometers looked intently into the spiral of strips of clouds that marked the generation point of typhoons; the peaceful sheep got out of the Shepherd's control, and I wanted to grasp the reasons for their recalcitrance, rancor and hostility. From these heights I was returned to the earth by Karlov-Tershchenko's whisper.

"Just take a look. Something very interesting is going on in this room. Mark my words, a mighty cyclone is brewing. The Vice President is talking to Nedelin. The experts on this issue maintain that Nedelin will fill the place of Moroz. If so, Shumsky will get Nedelin's job. There's nobody else. Only Shumsky, and Koval is listed as his stand-in. That's absolutely true; I saw the list of stand-ins. What does it mean? Well, my dear cloudologist, it means that Mytrokhina and Ter-Vartanov will go for Koval's job. Mytrokhina's chances are slim, she's approaching her retirement age and, whatever you may say, she's just a female of the species. I don't think Mytrokhina will win whatever her ... Ter-Vartanov, however... It's a typical and classic game of chess. The opening is over, pieces have been exchanged, and after castling the game proceeds to its serene and quiet end. The rest is just a matter technique. If Ter-Vartanov takes Koval's place, I land in the armchair of Ter-Vartanov. Why are you looking at me like that? Haven't you got the hang of it by now? All right, all right. I'm making the last move: you take my place. You'll get my salary. It's a hundred rubles more than you get now. Not bad, is it? Hey, just look at Nedelin. Look how the Vice President is listening to him. 'But Nedelin works in the Department of Water,' I argue uncertainly. Just take a look at him," Karlov-Tereshchenko whispered.

Our line had made considerable headway. It had by now formed a long tail, and on the green cloth of the table no red-and-black armbands were left. A second line of those waiting for the armbands had formed by the research assistant. Among them was Shumsky and Ter-Vartanov. Funny and resembling Charlie Chaplin, the lean Ter-Vartanov seemed to be particularly small beside the bulky 125-kilogram Shumsky, about whom legends were making the rounds in the Institute that he was afraid of stepping on conventional scales and so now and then he sneaked the backyard to determine his weight on truck scales. We were approaching the oak doors; any moment they might open, and therefore Karlov-Tereshchenko was buttoning up his jacket, while I was adjusting my armband. Koval's shoulders were twitching nervously. Mytrokhina was standing behind me. She was dressed in a new black suit, in which she had defended her doctoral thesis not so long ago.

Malaniuk was managing the oak doors. In a whisper he instructed us how we had to enter the conference hall, where we had to turn left, and how we should take up position at the coffin of the Old Man after relieving the guard of honor. Malaniuk was looking at his electronic wristwatch where the numerals flipped over like in the digital display of a cash register. Suddenly everything became distorted, the established ritual was upset, something unforeseen was going on, an anomaly and confusion set in, and all magnetic needles began to sweep off-scale erratically. A stranger entered the reading room. He wore a long mackintosh that had once

been gray but was now of an indeterminate earthly color. On his head he had a beret and behind his back a knapsack. The stranger bowed to all sides, without actually looking at anyone, took off his knapsack, put it beside Karlov-Tereshchenko's helmet, and made directly for the door where we stood; on his way he took the armband out of the hands of the confused research associate, fixed it to his right arm, and shoved the beret into his pocket. "Excuse me," he said, imperiously pushing Malaniuk aside. "I ask to be admitted free of turn... I was in the countryside... heard the news over the radio only this morning... The deceased and I ... together ... It's difficult for me to stand on my feet... I ask free of turn." He was gasping for breath; the wrinkled, suntanned skin on his neck had several shaving cuts. Malaniuk opened the door, admitting into the conference the four of us: the man in the mackintosh, Koval, me and Karlov-Tereshchenko. I heard Malaniuk apologizing to Mytrokhina.

We walked down a long passage formed by seats that were pushed aside; the stranger tripped on a floodlight cable; then we turned to the left and slowly walked to a carpet-covered and flower-bedecked rise on which stood the coffin like a red boat. On velvet pads glistened the gold and silver of orders. I never thought the Old Man had so many of them. The previous guard of honor stepped aside, making way for us. I took up position at the head of the Old Man, Koval stood at his feet; the man in the mackintosh stood on one side of the coffin, while Karlov-Tereshchenko on the other. I was face to face with Academician Moroz with his pale profile, tightly pressed lips, heavy eyelids and a large bony nose resembling a dorsal fin. I noticed a long carelessly made stitch at the back of the head and my heart contracted at the thought what the Pro-rector could have done to his brain. Behind the stranger, in the first row of seats, people in black were sitting, among them an elderly dark-browed woman with an imperious face, a blank look in her tearless eyes. Next to her, very much alike her and just as dark-browed, sat a young woman holding an infant in her arms. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a shudder rippling through Koval's shoulders. People kept walking past the coffin, either appearing in tightly packed groups, or spreading out singly, or else ceasing their rhythmic movement for a fleeting moment. There were faces of young people, quite a few of them carrying briefcases – probably students. They were looking at the Old Man, at the orders, flowers, and at us more likely out of curiosity than grief, and I thought that many of them were perceiving not the esoteric revelation of death, but the external, decorative shell of what was going on here. This generation had already missed the lectures of the Old Man.

"I've seen the clouds, I'm happy," Moroz used to say. "Fate ill-treats those people and those lands, to which it grants a cloudless sky. Bless the mutability of heavenly maps, the fluidity of and impermanence of cloud islands and continents. The most horrible nightmare is to see clouds made of ferroconcrete. Bless the birth of winds, the roots of winds, the sources of winds, the brooks and rivers of winds. The most horrible nightmare of my life would be the death of the wind in a world of waxen dummies instead of people in an airless space of immobile hair of girls and immobile grass. The history of winds is only in its infancy – mankind will yet develop the inexhaustible deposits of the wind just like the oil fields. The wind is the mightiest wrecker and the mightiest builder; it's the Great Architect and Reformer of the Sky. I invite you to a long journey to the celestial pastures. I don't promise you an easy journey. You'll come into huge flocks of unruly sheep. But he to whom the white flocks succumb will be invincible and omnipotent. And don't you ever forget Good. Apart from the laws of conservation of matter and energy, there exists the Law of Conservation of Good. Good, like oxygen, is eternal and imperishable, a thin and vivifying shell enveloping the Earth. But Good, just like oxygen, needs to be protected against toxic smokes. It will depend on you what the outcome will be: green trees

generating oxygen, or lethal smog in which everything living and existing will suffocate. You must do everything to launch a long period of Good on Earth."

Karlov-Tereshchenko, lean and stern, was standing at attention. His eyes, made the smaller by his glass lenses, were not directed at the Old Man but into nowhere. I looked at the Old Man's hands. They had about them the listlessness of a wizened plant, the yellowish dryness of leaves threaded with empty and brittle blood vessels. I imagined how early in the century *Gymnasium* student Moroz was holding with his young strong arms the ropes of a homemade balloon swept by a hurricane over Ukraine, steering it like his destiny, i.e. not steering it at all. I clenched my fists as if it were I flying above the earth in 1916, and felt the rigid heaviness of the waterlogged nylon towline stretching to the motorboat. Crouching in the cold September water, I was waiting for the takeoff, as Karlov-Tereshchenko tinkered with the engine that would not start for some reason. At last he vigorously pulled the starting cord, a bluish cloud enveloped the engine, Karlov-Tereshchenko gave me a wave and quickly took the front seat, without letting me out of his sight. The nylon towline meandering on the water surface slowly straightened out and tightened. That's the most critical moment of a takeoff. I was crouching in the water, pressing to my chest the plastic handle of the towline. The sharp points of my water skis stuck out of the water at an angle of 45 degrees, the tension was increasing, and at long last the irrepressible force of the towline pulled me onto the water surface; now I stretched out my arms and tightened my grip on the handle as much as I could. I was skidding over the river, feeling the density of the wind and the hardness of the short waves, along which my skis bumped like along a corrugated piece of plywood. To my left stretched the wake of the motorboat. Leaning to the right and shifting my weight accordingly, I made a steep turn and swept across the wake that resembled a deep frozen furrow of a tilth. Karlov-Tereshchenko waved his hand approvingly and gestured that he would make a turn opposite the far spit where a solitary wizened tree stood. The air was saturated with sunlight, my heart overflowed with joy, and I gave an exultant shout, waving my right hand, my left holding on to the plastic handle. I knew that on the bank Katya was watching beside the car. With hands stuck behind the waistband of her jeans to warm her chilled fingers, she stood there huddled, as the wind rippled her short black hair. We made a turn before the spit, my skis, like some quickly revolving compasses, described an ideal semicircle, the centrifugal force tried to tear me away from the towline and throw me onto the bank, but I was tightly holding on to the handle. Karlov-Tereshchenko accelerated the speed, upped his thumb on my performance, pallid wraiths of sandbanks in the dark underwater layers of the river flitted by underneath, presenting no danger to our flat-bottomed boat, and I was whooshing full blast toward Katya. All this was reminiscent of a dream, a chaste blissful dream with a slightly sour whiff of smoke – somebody had lit a bonfire on the bank. I pulled my foot out of the binding of the left ski, which immediately disappeared far behind, and now I was skidding on one ski, balancing on it like on the back of a dolphin. Just opposite Katya I let go of the towline. The motorboat kept churning on to the landing stage, my skid slowed down, I remained suspended over the water for a fleeting moment several meters from the bank, then I raised my hands and weightlessly sunk into the water; instinctively, I opened my eyes, seeing how beside me the ski buoyed up like a float, and then I saw the smiling face of Katya. She was standing ankle-deep in the water that was turning the denim of her jeans almost black.

Suddenly the bright glare of floodlights roused me from my reverie back to the conference hall, late October, the funeral of the Old Man, and the stitch on the back of his head. The stranger in the mackintosh was weeping, the streamlets of his bitter tears glistening dazzlingly in the blinding glare of the floodlights. His reddened, swollen eyes were looking fixedly at the Old

Man. I was overcome by shame; shame for witnessing the grief of this stranger; shame for my blissful dream, for that inappropriate, foolishly secretive dream in front of my deceased teacher in the coffin. I cringed in shame for the past year when I had visited the Old Man so rarely. The last time when I saw him, he was sitting all alone and cursing that somebody had removed from his office a long table that was set to his desk. Then he suddenly changed the subject: "You know, the Eskimos of Alaska have a saying: What do we look like, what do we look like? Like polar bears, like polar bears rapaciously lumbering across the sky. But once a merry wind comes blowing, the polar bears they disappear well-nigh." All his life the Old Man had been collecting folklore related to clouds and wind. But this particular saying he must have probably invented himself. Then he changed the subject of the conversation again. He asked me that I type out for him Ericsson's memorandum devoted to the environmental impact of air pollution of large industrial areas; I had read him the translation of it, and it excited his interest. But at that time I was running off my feet and worn out as things came coming up, I had to attend a conference that was memorable only because of a sumptuous banquet and, of course, forgot about my promise, then the Old Man was hospitalized for a long time, and then ... A cameraman was focusing on the face of the stranger who wept at the Old Man's coffin.

Mytrokhina popped up at my side. I couldn't understand what she wanted of me: I had other things on my mind. I should have tongue-lashed Havryliuk for that table that had been removed from the Old Man's office as something useless and not replaced by a new one; I should have typed out Ericsson's memorandum; I should have recorded on tape the Old Man's reminiscences about his flights on an air balloon; so many times I wanted to do that, but every time I forgot about it; I should have sent him a telegram on his birthday, without waiting for some round jubilee the entire country would know about; I should have visited his home in the house opposite the Opera House, just like that, without any prior phone calls, invitations and notice; I should have told him that his first book of 1929, *Hypotheses of the Sky*, was not obsolete at all, that the ideas it expounded would not be exhausted for a long time yet; I should have ... But Mytrokhina was almost pushing me away from the coffin. Now new people with red-and-black armbands were standing beside the stranger in the mackintosh and Karlov-Tereshchenko.

Our guard of honor had ended.

We returned to the reading room and walked past the preoccupied Maliuk who was anxiously glancing at his electronic wristwatch; then we passed the long line and the research associate from the Department of Air took off our armbands. The stranger took it off himself. He walked up to a table, squatted and stuck his arms into the strap of his knapsack. Then he wiped his tear-filled eyes with a brown-stained finger. Ter-Vartanov came up to him and asked something. "Now it's my turn," the stranger replied hoarsely. "I'll be the next." Without saying goodbye to anyone, he slowly walked out of the reading room. Karlov-Tereshchenko picked up his crash helmet, holding it carelessly by its hanging leather strap as if it were a pot in which anglers cooked fish soup. As we walked down the front stairway, a lot of people were coming our way, but I did not take in either the faces or the details of their clothes, only guessing the general essence of their movement – upstairs to the Old Man.

Once outside, I began counting the busses: eleven, in all. I counted again, persistently trying to locate the twelfth, as if this exercise were on any importance.

"Do you know who that visitor was?" Karlov-Tereshchenko asked. "I mean the one in the mackintosh. That was the former director of our Institute, the fiercest enemy of Moroz. Twenty-five years ago he called the Old Man an idealist, reactionary and hell knows what else. He relieved him of the post of laboratory head, and then kicked him out altogether. It was the

physicists who saved the Old Man then, employing him as a junior research assistant. And then... then Space Age was ushered in. They remembered the Old Man, he returned to the Institute. He was awarded a State Prize for Science, and this man was sent packing to while away his retirement playing domino. Know what the Old Man said when this one was leaving the Institute? 'I pray to God that He grant him a long life. There is no greater punishment for a villain than a long life.'"

At long last I discovered that dratted twelfth bus. It was parked in front of the Board of Honor that began with the photograph of Academician Moroz. In it the Old Man was wearing the same sad smile when he told me the Eskimo saying about the polar bears. A group of brass band players, their horns glistening in the sun, were idling in front of the Board of Honor.

"Listen, let's go back," I said to Karlov-Tereshchenko.

"Go back where to?"

"To the line, to the Old Man."

Karlov-Tereshchenko agreed and we retraced our steps up the main stairway.

Translated by Anatole Bilenko