The Latlander

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Dedicated to my Father, Mother, and sisters.



In Memorian of Arvids Grinbergs

When I first started writing this book, I expected to publish it to my friend and “adopted” grandfather, Arvids Grinbergs, and being true to the surprise, I intended to only show him this work in his birthday, two weeks before the expected publication, in May. Unfortunately, he passed away in October. His fathers’ experience as a soldier in the First World War and the following War of Latvian Independence was chief among the many stories and tales that inspired this book. I was told these stories as a child and they never left my mind, even in adulthood, writing this book was a laborious and long task as I could not accept anything less than the magic I felt when I first imagined them.

In a certain sense, I knew the long time to research, refine and compose this book meant it could only be published in Arvids’ final years. I remember reading once in a Christmas card of an old latvian-brazilian writer, who in the same situation as me, wrote:

*Dear Grandpa,*

*In the days of yore, when I was reluctant to sleep, you’d sit by my bedside, and read me stories of old.*

*Now we’re older, and by the time I finish writing my stories, you may be too old to read them,*

*But don’t worry, it will be my turn to sit by your bedside and read them for you.*

The tale I set out to write was one of friendship found in dark times, and of bravery in face of tough battles, most of which we lose. I started to write in his honor and now will finish in his memory. His and the many others whose memory I hope to cherish:

M. Purvics †, F. Grinbergs, A. Apse, J. Purins, A.Purins (Deported), J. A. Freijss (Deported), J. Inkis (Deported), F. Kronlin †, J. Jankovski †, A. Leijasmeijer †, A. Lidak †, Planats †, and all others.

- GMR

# Prologue

Mapa

Descrição gerada automaticamente

## Chapter 1 The Disappearance of Kristofer Keidann

Late Autumn 1915. 2nd Latvian Riflemen Regiment, 24 miles south of Riga.

The day dawned clear and serene. The amber rays of sunshine cut through the dense oak forest, and the top of the trees swayed with the sound of the distant German artillery. So it had been in the years in Latvia. This time, however, *it felt closer.*

If not for this occasional drumming of the artillery – positioned some dozen miles south - the woods would be silent. An inattentive wanderer would barely spot the soldiers – dressed in their Russian Imperial brownish uniform – face-down in the floor, still as statues. No order of silence had been given, and yet no man dared to break that silence.

The 2nd Riflemen, formed recently with the local factory workers of Riga – the capital of the province of Latvia – had spent that fine morning filling sandbags, loading cartridges and, of course, digging foxholes. The time they had to do so, however, meant their trenches were no more than a few, half-meter deep, holes in the ground, which the soldier had to lay with their entire body in the dirt if they wanted the tiniest inch of protection. That was because the 9th German Army had advanced, always with the sinister speed German armies often did since the start of the war, crossing the frontier between the provinces of Lithuania and Latvia and besieged the city of Jelgava. The men in that forest had watched the city burn and scream for months.

Since the start of they war they had pushed the Czar and his army further and further from the borders of the empire, occupying the western lands and threatening the Russian heartland. In this very morning the 9th Army was swallowing allied units in the south. Every man in that forest knew that the artillery the 2nd Latvian Riflemen was hearing was now falling on the head of some poor bastard – and soon it too would fall in their heads, in that calm and serene forest.

*Tum*. The artillery was rhythmic, like a tick-tock reminding the men in the regiment of the coming fight. The Germans’ war worked like clockwork, and gave no signs of fatigue, and it made the German look less humans and more like cogs in this all-consuming machine.

Holding the line against them was a mean task no men truly wanted, but each and every one would fulfil. They were no more than factory workers, farmhands, craftsmen – some too young to have beards, some too old to have hair – but they would have to do. Most never had touched a gun before, but still held their chest bravely and fashioned themselves as soldiers, warriors of their land – the same land and dirt they had now smeared in their faces as they lied face-down in the trenches.

Most had not even travelled far from the city or village they were born but were infuriated by the idea that someone would leave their country and march through half a continent to conquer theirs’. They would protect their home against the German crusader, as their ancestors had done in the 13th century.

Each of those men used their silence differently. There, lying behind those small mounds of earth they had dug, some prayed, some checked and rechecked their weapons and ammunition, and others gazed far and wide through the trunks of trees, looking for the incoming Germans. No man dared to break the silence. Well, no man indeed, but a young lad – running between trenches and trees carrying two boxes of ammunition. He brought from headquarters the last supplies the 2nd would receive. “Last one”, he said.

“God bless ye, Kriss”, whispered the sergeant, as he pushed a soldier that lied by his side in the foxhole to open space for the newcomer, and the lad was quick to lay down. Each of the three men gathered a handful of bullets from the wooden crate and stuffed their pockets the best they could.

Kriss tried to point his rifle towards, but he was too awkwardly compressed between the two men, so he resorted to just look the way back, and he could see many other holes, each with their own soldiers, scattered across the forest. Only a few men were still up, trying to dig deeper. They were in the forwardmost hole in the woods. After that it was *Badlands*, they called. No one knew if the next person coming in the forest would be retreating friends or advancing foes.

*Tum*. The artillery roared above like a thunder and made a few leaves and breeches fall from the trees. Kriss found it uncanny, he felt safe in the forest. *A calm before the storm*, his father would say. In his childhood summers, Kriss would hide below the trees near his house from the rain. This rain, however, would be different, it would be of metal and fire.

He didn’t linger on the thought much. Kriss liked feeling safe there face down in the mud, like a child. The breeze between the woods and the smell of pine were familiar to him. It felt impossible that the Germans could ever destroy a forest like that. He knew it. His father was a woodchopper. He would bring trees down with his axe, and he knew the strength of every tree he planted and every tree he bought down. But this was different, they said the Germans had machines that could burn entire forests. Uproot grown trees from their ground.

“Any idea who’s getting the beatin’?”, the soldier by his side asked as he light a cigarrete. He had to decided whether to keep the cigarettes or the bullets in his pocket. Kris didn’t know him much, he was a factory worker, and older man whose face seemed permanently greyed by industrial smoke. Kris found it funny that a man who worked with so many chimneys would smoke like one. He sounded unconcerned or disinterested, as though he preferred the Germans unleashed the “beating” on allied units, rather than his’.

“Must be 3rd Regiment or the blokes from Jelgava”, answered the sergeant. He was a big but surprisingly tender man, at least to Kris. His face was fat and rounded and often seemed struggling with the collar of his uniform. He had big arms from carrying crates in the docks, and his thick accent Kris laugh a little, although never in front of him. He always gave the orders but followed by some good advice. “And don’t let Wilks catch ya smoking in duty”, he chuckled, “or you will be getting a beatin’ of yer own”.

“Aye”, repeated the soldier, in a monotone, slightly mocking fashion. “Why bother, I don’t think it will be worst than this”, he said with a half-chuckle. “To be fair”, he reconsidered “maybe the damned bastards in the 3rd getting shelled are having an easier time than us with Wilks… bloody git he is”, he put the cigarette in his mouth again. “Know anyone from the 3rd, Sarge?”

*Tum*, said the artillery. “Nay, don’t think so,” answered the sergeant, also trying to sound distant from the carnage. “Do you, Kris?”, but the young lad didn’t want to be dragged in the conversation. He felt eerily uncomfortable of speaking of his comrades in arms that way. *Every man wants to look tough*, his father often said, and he knew everyone was a little bit scared, just as him.

*Yes,* he wanted to answer, *I do know a poor bastard getting shelled at the 3rd Regiment*. It was his brother. But what was the point? Collecting pity from the other two man in the trench? Who probably had their own brothers to worry? No. Kris felt that the fact he had a brother in the 3rd Regiment changed little the fact they were getting smashed by the Germans. *Why bother*. He repeated with the monotone voice of the smoking soldier in his head.

*But* he had something else to say. He had to say it felt like a queer day for war. Not that he had experience in war, but when he pictured a day of it, it did not feel like this. It did not feel like morning breeze, and it did not smell like pine. He had ignored the conversation of his colleagues to observe the treetops. The majestic green conifers of the forest - Riga pines, aptly named after the capital of the province of Latvia - framed the blue sky above them, and they danced and shook with every tum of the German artillery. It seemed too calm and beautiful, too serene for war. *No***.** He wanted to say. *It is not a day for war, it is a day for picnic.*

He remembered the Saturdays of his childhood, when his mother woke early to bake bread and his father left to cut trees, and he would spend the day running and playing in the meadows. His father, smelling of pine and wood, would come home with his axe and sit at the small wooden table to lunch. Yes, he could picture them all around the table. Him, mother, father, and his brother. *Yes*, his brother. *He would be there running and playing in the meadows with me*. After lunch his father slept and mother took the bread out of the oven, and they played in the mud, they often came dirty, but their mother cleaned their faces with a small towel. They would pack their homemade bread and homemade jelly in a small white red checkered blanket and head off into the meadow. They would find a small and comfortable spot of grass and spent the afternoon together…

*Tum*, his memories interrupted by that damn noise. He wondered if the man loading the canons were satisfied. Meanwhile, his trench colleagues seemed to continue the discussion of whether they knew or not anyone from the 3rd, and the many candidates included some cousin’s colleague, or neighbour’s in-law. “I recall now I used to play cards with one of ‘em sub officer.”, the smoker said to the sergeant, “pretty sure the git played marked cards”

The sergeant extended his hand and captured the cigarette out of the soldier’s mouth, who answered with a complaint. For a second it seemed like the sergeant would throw it out and or berate him for insulting an officer, but instead took a long smoke. “Cheaters never prosper”, the sergeant chuckled and handed the cigarette back. “Know anyone, Kris?”.

“I…”, Kris said after moments of silence. He stared at the sky and for fleeting seconds, he imagined himself like a child again. It was all there: the forest, the pines, the brownish dirt, his brother. After some minutes, he had his answer directed not to any of his hole colleagues: “How queer life has changed…”

*Tum*, agreed the artillery. That hideous bass seemed ever so close. Some place south of that forest, some poor bastard of the 3rd had his arms and legs blown off – and yet the day looked awfully fitting for a picnic. What had happened to the world? Or better, what happened to those days of childhood? It wasn’t long ago, *right?* It couldn’t be. He was 17 years old that autumn, barely the age to be a soldier, much less to be *old*. He tried to believe he still had plenty of time. Time to go home, time to spend with his father, with his mother, with his *brother*. *17 years old*, Kris thought, and yet he felt like the cold fingers of the reaper stood on his shoulder. He was still young… *wasn’t he?*

It was not a German shell that answered him this time, but the rapid trotting of hooves in the mud echoed in the woods. Kris tried to lift his body to see but his sergeant held him down. “Horse”, he murmured. “No movement to the right”, the smoker murmured, struggling to keep the cigarette in his mouth, while checking the surroundings slowly with his rifle, “ours or theirs?”

*Tum*, and the horse continued. “Ours or theirs?”, the soldier asked again. “How would I know?” uttered the sergeant. After a few seconds the sound stopped, and from the indistinguishable and seemingly endless corridors of trees emerged the figure. The rider stopped a few meters from their hole and had the same brownish Russian imperial uniform as the men, and he gasped for some air. He and his horse seemed exhausted, but he quickly recomposed and lifted his arm up, showing a small piece of paper.

*Tum*. “Is this the 3rd regiment?” the rider asked. The sergeant quickly rose from the hole in the ground and stepped forward towards the rider, “Sorry lad, this is Riga’s 2nd”. He left his rifle hanging in his back from the bandolier in his shoulder and slowly approached the rider to his water canteen. *“Sarge…”*, murmured the soldier by Kris’ side. He seemed uneasy. His voiced was muffled by…

*Tum*. “They cut our comms. Who’s your officer?” the rider asked. “Ol’ Wilks.” The sergeant moved his arm to point south with his canteen. “you can find the 3rd heading this…”. “SARGE!”. The soldier by Kris’ side screamed, dropping the cigarette from his mouth, but it was too late. A bullet ripped through the air.

*Tum* muffled the sound. The shot came from deep into the woods, and Kris saw a whip of red blood lash from the sergeant’s shoulder. The red line coloured the green leaves and brownish ground. His sergeant tried to step back clumsily to a nearby tree, but a second bullet came, and he fell into the ground. It was fast. The rider seemed equally dumbfounded, and he didn’t move until another bulled hit him too.

*Tum*. Kris could barely see the flashes from the rifles, let alone the shadows moving in the woods. The soldier by his side was firing in the treeline, trying to hit the invisible enemy. By instinct, Kris tried to look for the sergeant. He always told them what to do… dig here, run there, shot, stop… but there stood him, laid on the ground like a sack of potatoes. His chubby, rounded face now in the mud. He barely knew the sergeant – and they had exchanged few words, outside the given orders – and yet Kris felt a gut punch. He would never hear that chubby man again, never hear his advice or his thick accent. Never see his chubby face fighting against the collar of his uniform. Dead, gone, with his arm stretched by his side, still holding the canteen he was trying to offer to the rider. Kris thought he saw it moving…

*Tum.* “HE’S DEAD, KID!”. Kris didn’t even realize it, but he tried to jump out of his trench, but the soldier by his side held him. It was then that Kris saw the whip of red blood that had gushed out of the sergeant had painted the leaves red, and his body was now in a pool of blood. It was then when he felt the warmth of the drops of blood that he had on his face. He froze for a moment and looked at the other man: the rider. He was still strapped on top of his horse, his head down and his arm still held the piece of paper he had shown. Now a bullet hole was right in the middle of his brownish Russian uniform. And it was slowly being coloured red. For a moment, the rider seemed petrified like a statue, until he slowly slid to the side and hit the ground.

*Tum.* At this point, the Russian imperial machine guns in the rear lines realized what was happening, and the hellfire started, as the entire forest lit up with flashes of light. The horse probably understood the situation before Kris, as he panicked and started to run in the direction of their trench. The horse neighed and reared as he almost stomped Kris and the soldier. Both held their heads down and for a moment. Kris looked at the sky again: it was still blue and beautiful – the day for a picnic. The tender smell of fresh leaves and oak filled up the air, as the machine guns chipped parts of trees, and it all slowly fell into the ground. For that small, improbable moment, the entire forest seemed suspended by these particles.

*Tum*, interrupted the artillery, as it had done before. But this time Kris had a horrible, horrible realization: *it was closer now*. He had not realized until then, but there, lying on their hole, he felt the entire ground was shaking. *They said the Germans had machines that could burn entire forests. Uproot grown trees from their ground.* No, they can’t do that. *It felt impossible that the Germans could ever destroy a forest like that*. He felt uneasily exposed. For a second everything he thought that morning came to him like a flash: the trees, the soldiers digging, the conversation, the beating, Wilks, Riga’s 2nd, some poor bastard a few miles in the south having his legs blown off – then the flash ended. *The calm before the storm*, his father said. *Now the storm came*, he thought.

What he heard next as inhuman. In that still, quiet morning, he heard the loudest sound he ever heard in his life. And everything else felt silent. It was so loud it appeared that even the soldiers firing had stopped for a second. A shell had hit the rear lines, and dirt and splinters flew miles across the forest. It probably had hit one Russian machine gun, because when they started to shoot again, it felt quieter. In fact, everything felt quieter, it was as his ear was underwater. And he felt a trail of blood slip from his eardrums. The ground beneath him continued to shake. It was like a hole would appear and drag the entire forest to the centre of the earth. He tucked his head out of the hole, stunned. He didn’t know what to do, but he surely didn’t want to die that day.

It was then when he saw the rider was still moving. He had his face down in the dirt and his back up, as he crawled on his fours in towards him. The soldier by Kris’ side, the smoker, the factory worker with his permanently greyed face, the one who said it was better the bastards at the 3rd than him, saw the rider too. If he said anything, Kris couldn’t tell, nor could he hear. What he heard, was the deep breath of the rider. He murmured, and stumbled, and crawled, and gasped for air. Kris and the smoker looked at each other, and with no words but a nod, both jumped forward. Each held the rider by his arms and dragged him through the few meters in the forest, leaving a trail on the dirt of the forest. His head was down and bobbed as they walked, but he still held the paper in his hand. “You’ve got to…”, he murmured.

Another big explosion shocked the earth when they had almost reached their hole. Splinters from the trees flew like bullets. Both men fell in their hole and dragged the rider inside with their hands. “The order…”, the rider coughed and held his arm high, he grasped the paper with so much strength it almost ripped apart, “I’ve got to give it to the 3rd regiment…”. The smoker tried to press his chest, trying to hold the blood coming out of the rider’s chest. Another big explosion. Earth and dirt fell over their heads. “… completely surrounded” , he tried to finish.

Kris and the Smoker exchanged another stare, “Go”, he said, “I’ll hold the line”, and he started firing his rifle into the treeline again. Kris froze… *but where and how*... He looked back at the rear lines, and he could see the silhouette of the horse, lit by the glow of the morning sun, standing before the trees. The aptly named Riga Pines. And looking forward he could see the flashes and shadows of the enemies moving through. And *just there, right there* at the end of the forest, he could still see the smoke coming from the direction of Jelgava. *The men in that forest had watched the city burn and scream for months, and now he would run right into it*. Why? For the rider, who crawled on all fours through the dirt. For his sergeant who often called him “kid”, and his chubby face down in the dirt. For the bastards 3rd regiment, about to be surrounded. And finally, for his brother, wherever he was. *Yes, his brother. He would be there running and playing in the meadows with me in my childhood*. And now he would run through the meadows.

“GO!”, the soldier screamed again, as they heard the zip of artillery through the skies. Kris grabbed the paper with the orders in the rider’s hand and ran. Through the rear lines, through the soldiers, through the machine guns. And mounted on the horse, he would run through the forest and through the enemy. He would run to try to reach the 3rd battalion before the enemy did - and give them whatever orders were on that paper. Two men had already died for it, and many more would die without it.

In that fateful day, a day for picnics and not war, Kris Keidann and his horse disappeared into the smoke of the battlefield.

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A few weeks later, not far from there, another trail of smoke crossed the forests. Markuss Keidann rode the train in the opposite direction. Most trains went to the frontline full of soldiers – like cattle to the slaughter. And came back empty.

He spied through the small metal bars of his window – if he could call it that – in the makeshift wagon he was in. Before the war it carried animals or crates. Now it carried men. His window was not very big - some army engineer had cut an irregular square in the side and clenched some vertical wooden bars – so the interior of the train was mostly dark, except for the rays of light illuminating the dusty interior.

The train bulged and shook irregularly through the forests of Latvia, and Markuss often felt the golden rays of sun in his cheeks, then the darkness again. He watched as the mud and dirt of the frontlines become the green and yellow fields of inner Latvia. It was a prize very few of the soldiers in the Russian Imperial Army could afford. Yet, it was by no means a luxurious voyage: his train carried crates and wounded soldiers back into the countryside. The army logistics called them *reusables*, because they were to be sent back with new supplies - they only bought those deemed still worthy after a few repairs, those too damaged were left in the frontlines to rot – be their wounded or crates.

Markuss fell observed; maybe it was the strange fact he was not wounded (except for a scar in his cheek, but that was older than the war), nor was he a crate. The entire trip he stared at the window to avoid crossing gazes with any of the wounded. He inflated his chest to look more serious, but he did not believe it was truly working. *Every man wants to look tough*, his father often said, and he knew everyone was a little bit scared, just as him. And yet, he still felt observed, maybe it could be his new, clean, officer uniform, a far cry from the ripped and dirt uniforms of the wounded, or maybe it was the two flowers he carried on his lap – one for his dead father, the other for his dying mother.