

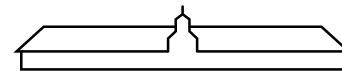
Eugénie Ussakovskaya

# BALL GOWNS AND BOLSHIEVIKS

An autobiographical novel

*Adapted and translated into Dutch  
from the original manuscript by Janine Jager*

*English translation by Rosalind Buck*



# CONTENTS

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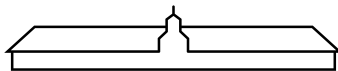
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Strengholt Book Publishing  
Hofstede 'Oud –Bussem'

Flevolaan 41, 1411 KC Naarden, the Netherlands

P.O. Box 338, 1400 AH Bussum, the Netherlands

T: +31(0) 35 6958411

F: +31(0) 35 6958440

E: info@strengholt.nl

www.strengholt.nl

Foreword	7
Shanghai, 22 June 1941	9
I Boyars, Courtiers and Generals	13
II Distant War, Nearby Troubles	27
III Grand Tour and Alone in the World	35
IV Table Talk and Holy Days	55
V Country Life	73
VI Rasputin's Eyes	89
VII Pink Pom-Poms and White Nights	111
VIII Tango and Troika	127
IX The "Great War"	147
X Danses Macabres	167
XI Knight in Shining Armour	181
XII Honeymoon and Revolution	199
XIII Baby Leto – Ladies' Summer	217
XIV Bridge and Bolsheviks	239
XV Kasha, Cabbage and Black Bread	261
XVI Deus Ex Machina	279
XVII Flight from Omsk	299
Glossary	315

## FOREWORD

Eugénie Ussakovskaya was born in 1897 in Russia, the youngest daughter of a czarist general of Polish descent and a member of the Russian high nobility. After the 1917 October Revolution, she fled by the Trans-Siberian railway to China. Like many of her compatriots, Ussakovskaya eventually found herself in Shanghai, together with her husband and newborn child. In the 1920s and 30s, this modern, cosmopolitan port town on the Chinese east coast was the major centre for Russian “White” emigration in the Far East. For the estimated twenty-five to thirty thousand “Shanghai Russians”, living conditions were generally wretched. Through her marriage to a Frenchman, Ussakovskaya had acquired French nationality and was spared the harsh lot of a stateless citizen. In time, her husband returned to Europe alone. Ussakovskaya was a proud, class-conscious aristocrat, but prepared to work hard if needs be. Thanks to her excellent upbringing, in addition to Russian she spoke fluent French, German and English. She found a job as an executive secretary in an international shipbuilding company. Her income allowed her to live comfortably, as she herself described it. Ussakovskaya spent the war years

of 1941 – 1945 in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. When the communists seized power in China in the late 1940s, she moved to Hong Kong. Later, she emigrated to Southern Spain. By then well into her eighties, it was there that Ussakovskaya began to write. When the first, rough version of the book was finished, more than five hundred pages typed on an old Remington, she wrote to her grandson, “I am dying to have this book published. It shows the life of my family, which in part is also yours”. In 1997, at the age of 99, Ussakovskaya died in Marbella, Spain, where she was buried. She never saw her Russian homeland again.

The manuscript that Ussakovskaya had left came to me recently through her grandson. When I read it, I was filled with enthusiasm and eagerly agreed to transcribe and adapt this semi-autobiographical novel for publication. The book recounts the privileged life of a young aristocrat in the latter days of the Russian Empire and the bitter experiences during the subsequent world war and revolution. Fascinating and true to life, it’s chronicled by a contemporary familiar with the nobility from the inside, who watched the great historical events of 1917 unfold before her eyes. The main character “Génia”, Ussakovskaya’s alter ego, nonetheless writes without rancour or regret for what is lost and gone forever. The tone is light and her narrative, brimming with descriptive detail, effortlessly transports the reader back to one of the most dramatic periods in Russian history.

*Janine Jager*

## SHANGHAI, 22 JUNE 1941

The porcelain clock on the mantelpiece in the living room says ten to six, almost time for the early evening news. I turn on the radio and the faint strains of a Chopin piano nocturne fill the room. At exactly six o’clock, the music stops. An impersonal voice announces the date, time, temperature, air pressure, wind force and wind direction. Then follows a longer account of military operations on both the Allied and the German side; a summary of land and sea battles, of advancing and retreating armies. I listen intently.

The Russian community of many thousands of refugees in China is following the dramatic events in far-off Europe with mixed feelings and is deeply divided. The “White” Russians left their country after the 1917 revolution. These are anti-communists, opposed to Soviet rule. They have managed, with difficulty, to forge themselves a new existence in Harbin and big port towns such as Tientsin and Shanghai. Those fortunate enough to find a job at one of the English, American, French or Dutch companies in China generally sympathise with the Allies. Those working for German companies are hoping for a German victory. A third group of Russian exiles couldn’t care less who wins the war, as

long as they can do business in China and the silver dollar coins keep jingling in their pockets. These are mostly independent shopkeepers, merchants, brokers and property owners. Despite their varying political leanings and financial interests, deep in their hearts all Russian refugees cherish one hope, namely that the war will lead to a collapse of the despised communist Soviet regime.

After all the news of bombed cities and sunken ships, the broadcast ends with a pleasant weather forecast. The tropical storm with wind speeds of 120 kilometres an hour that has been approaching Shanghai, threatening the city, has changed course and is, at this moment, heading towards Japan.

The radio programme resumes with a Haydn Symphony. I leave the living room door open and go into the kitchen to see what *amah* Ah Chen is cooking. Ah Chen is a talented cook, like so many Chinese, and conjures up the most delicious meals on a daily basis, using just a few ingredients and some simple utensils. Making my way back to the living room, I hear the music abruptly stop. Through the ether, the broadcaster's voice sounds ceremonial: "There now follows an important news bulletin. You are urged to continue listening".

The news is shocking: Hitler's armies have invaded the Soviet Union without any Russian provocation or any official declaration of war. I stand, nailed to the spot, in the middle of the room. Politics is not my forte. In August 1939, Hitler and Stalin had their ministers for foreign affairs sign a non-aggression pact in Moscow. The whole world reacted in shock and incredulity to this unholy alliance between fascism and communism. What I can't understand, though, is why, less than two years later, the German dictator is sud-

denly breaking his pact with Stalin. After all, England remains unconquered and determined to fight to the bitter end.

As in 1914, my former fatherland is once more at war with Germany. In my mind's eye I see long convoys of army trucks full of German soldiers in drab uniforms crossing Russia's borders. Heavy tanks with high turrets roll slowly onward over the flat, swampy land, like strange prehistoric beasts. German servicemen are pitching camp in woods scented with mushrooms and wild strawberries, crossing broad, sluggish rivers and advancing over sun-baked steppes, along dusty roads cutting through endless fields of ripening wheat. I was born and raised in the "Holy Russia" of before the revolution. The subsequent horrific civil war has forced me to leave my homeland for good.

I don't get a wink of sleep that night. It's extremely warm for the month of June and a stifling heat hangs over the city like a damp blanket. I've left the bedroom window open. There's not a breath of wind and the electric fan on the ceiling revolves lethargically, offering no cooling respite. The chirping of the indefatigable cicadas is deafening. It's neither their racket, the heat nor the bloodthirsty mosquitoes endeavouring to discover a hole in the net around my bed that is keeping me awake, though.

Hitler's invasion of Russia is bringing back a flood of memories I had long since banished from my mind. Quite consciously and with a certain stoic indifference. I've always refused to ally myself with the embittered refugees, unable to reconcile themselves with the change in circumstances and still clinging to their former lives of real or

imagined grandeur. I detest the way my Russian friends go on about the old days, even if I do understand their ceaseless moaning and complaining.

I lie in the dark, tossing and turning in a vain attempt to find some rest before the sun creeps over the windowsill and the new day begins. Sleep will not come, though, and I eventually give up. I resign myself to the prospect of a sleepless night and allow myself to be transported to a glittering, but now vanished world.

# I

## BOYARS, COURTIERS AND GENERALS

I am sitting on a glossy parquet floor in the middle of an enormous room, broad shafts of light are falling through the high windows and I am in floods of tears because every time I stretch out my hand to catch the golden motes dancing in the sunbeams they evade my fingers.

The room in which I find myself in that very first childhood memory is one of the huge rooms of our apartment in the centre of St Petersburg. We live in the General Staff building complex that encompasses the south side of Palace Square like a half moon. In the middle of the gigantic square towers the red-granite Alexander Column, crowned with a golden angel. On the other side is the Winter Palace. When Nicholas II and his family are in residence, from our windows on one of the uppermost floors we can see the little imperial princesses playing in the walled side garden. During balls and official receptions, my little sister Olga and I curl up on the wide, upholstered window seats to watch the guests arriving at the brightly-lit Winter Palace. It makes us laugh to see our parents – Mama in gala gown, Papa in full military regalia, his chest bedecked with ribbons – getting into a carriage to

be taken to the entrance of the palace, no more than three minutes' walk away.

The Palace Square also provides a military spectacle. I remember the guards regiments forming columns to escort the imperial family to the Champ de Mars, where the annual grand parade is held in May. Mama and Olga, who is five years older than I, go to the parade while I stay at home with the servants. I'm too small to go with them. With my nose pressed up against the window I soon forget my sadness. The square is filling with glittering uniforms, swaying plumes and feathers. I recognise the hussars by their fur-trimmed, short, red jackets and the Cossacks by their long, blue coats and tall fur hats. The sun glints on the silver and gold breastplates and on the cavalry officers' helmets, adorned with flying eagles. The horses have been meticulously groomed until their black, grey or chestnut-brown bodies glisten. They stand stock still, like statues, one occasionally tossing its head or impatiently stamping a foot.

Suddenly, everyone assumes the military position, the sabres fly from their scabbards and, as one voice, the loud cry of *Zdrav'ia zhelaem, Vashe Imperatorskoye Vysochestvo!* (Long live Your Imperial Majesty!) echoes across the square: Empress Alexandra and her two eldest daughters come out and climb into the waiting calashes, while the emperor and his entourage follow on horseback. I recognise the slender figure of my father, mounted on a dapple grey horse. He and Grand Duke Nikolai stand out from the other generals and imperial adjutants.

When they get back home, Olga gives me an elated account of the festive event in the Champ de Mars. "Really, I've never seen anything like it, wonderful, particularly the

final manoeuvre of the great attack. I was scared to death when the whole horde of cavalymen charged towards us at full gallop. I thought the grandstands would give way and we should be trampled beneath the horses' hooves. But just a few yards before the Imperial Lodge, they suddenly halted their horses as one man. You should have heard the cheering, Génia. Deafening! A chorus of hurrahs flooded over the plane from thousands of calashes... The horsemen must have been practising for ages, months, such precision, such perfect timing. Incredible!"

The enormous General Staff complex is primarily a military office building but, in addition to a number of apartments like ours, it also houses a library, a ballroom and a chapel. In Saint George's Hall hang marble plaques inscribed in golden letters with the names of the knights of the Order of St George, Russia's highest military honour for exceptional courage and service to the Fatherland in times of war. Amongst them are some of my forefathers.

My father, General Alexander Neplyuyev, comes from an old boyar lineage. One day, he shows me a slim, morocco-bound booklet containing a long list of names of his family members. His family tree goes back to the thirteenth century. I find out who my oldest forefather is: a boyar with the rather unflattering name of Kobyla, "Mare". Surnames mean little in Russia, however; the earliest known Russian family is called Sobakin (of the dog), the name being derived from a Turkish or Mongolian word – *sobaka*. The Romanovs, the dynasty that has occupied the Russian throne for three hundred years, stem from that same Kobyla.

My forefathers include many military commanders, but

also provincial governors, earl marshals and chamberlains. In my romantic girl's dreams, I like to compare myself with the heroines from thrilling adventure stories, so I find my predecessors actually rather dull, so totally void of any glamour. No poets, writers, composers or painters have immortalised our name. Just one family member, an envoy in Constantinople at the time of Czar Peter the Great, wrote his memoirs.

My mother is called Yadwiga. She's the daughter of an impoverished Polish nobleman who is not only plagued by gout but suffers under the burden of an enormous mortgage on his estates. My parents first meet in Warsaw at a ball in honour of Grand Duke Mikhail, in whose entourage my father is travelling as a military adviser. He falls in love with her at first sight and she soon succumbs to his charms. The old nobleman had hoped for a better match for his eldest daughter and the idea of having to relinquish her to a Russian insults his patriotic sensibilities. After all, the Russians are his country's sworn enemies. Times are hard, however, and the male offspring of aristocratic Polish families eager to marry are on the lookout for rich young ladies. The future Russian bridegroom is no millionaire, but he's far from destitute. Moreover, he graduated with honours from the General Staff's Nikolayevsky Academy and has served as an officer in the Imperial Guard. When my mother meets him, he's already attached to the General Staff, with a brilliant career ahead of him.

Yadwiga, or Yadi, as she's generally called, cajoles and begs her unwilling father for permission to marry. It's only when the question of a dowry is cautiously brought up and

her Russian suitor indignantly announces that he's not a fortune hunter and desires no such thing, that my Polish grandfather drops his objections. *Il faut vivre avec son temps*, you have to move with the times, he's purported to have said.

From a young age, my mother has enjoyed a thorough education. She speaks German and French and, immediately after her wedding, applies herself to Russian. She's soon able to hold an entertaining conversation in this difficult language, read Russian classics and write brief letters to friends and acquaintances in an elegant Cyrillic hand. She also manages her household in an exemplary fashion. Unlike many Russian women in our circles, who never set foot inside the kitchen, she enjoys showing the cook how to make a delicious Polish *kapuśniak* (sauerkraut soup) or *makowiec* (poppy seed strudel).

Her Russian husband's family and friends are extremely taken with the amiable, high-spirited Yadi. Even the most catty ladies in society life sheath their claws, knowing that Mama is madly in love with her own husband and has no intention of trespassing on their hunting ground. Yadi never gossips and, when someone criticises her friends in her presence, she immediately stands up for them.

Although my mama is a devout Catholic, she admires the grandeur of our Russian Orthodox ceremonies and goes to church with us, where she listens in rapture to the choral singing, even going as far as to say it the most beautiful there is. Her greatest regret is that she has never given her husband a male heir. My birth almost cost her her life and, thereafter, she was unable to have any more children.

I have never met my family on my mother's side. The Pol-



ish relatives adamantly refuse to visit Russia, that “barbarian country”. I know that, deep in her heart, Mama thinks they are right. She faithfully corresponds with her mother, who is bedridden since surviving two strokes. My grandfather is already dead by then. She also writes to her two brothers and two sisters and her uncle, a cardinal. For birthdays, christenings and weddings she sends them expensive gifts. It’s more or less expected of her. If ever she complains about their stiff, unfriendly attitude Papa comforts her, saying, “Those damned compatriots of yours will never forgive us for having them under our thumb”.

Mama’s youngest cousin, Petrus Movicz, who lives in Lithuania, is the only one in her family able to see past the borders and, one day, he honours us with a visit. Count Movicz arrives in the Russian capital when I am twelve years old and I find him fascinating. He’s tall, with blonde, almost white hair. With his pale countenance and refined elegance, he resembles an eighteenth-century French courtier, more suited to the time of Louis XVI than to ours. He’s on his way to Ashgabad to join a team of American archaeologists excavating the *kurgans*, the Sythian burial mounds in the Trans-Caspian Desert.

Mama’s branch of the family may be impoverished, but her cousin is swimming in money and has expensive tastes. Papa cannot understand why such a dandy should have archaeology as his hobby: “I can’t for the life of me see him sleeping in a tent and spending day after day without a hot bath or a decent meal just so he can dig up old, bleached bones from the sand”.

I disagree with him. I love listening to Petrus’ stories about

the excavations in which he has participated and which he has financed from his own pocket. I’m in seventh heaven when he takes me on a journey in his phaeton, a fashionable four-wheeled carriage drawn by two fiery, fox-coloured horses. In my childish vanity, of course, I’m hoping we will bump into my friends and they will see how stylishly we are driving over Nevsky Prospekt.

During one of these rides he gives me an etiquette lesson. We are crawling along in a succession of coaches when a landau passes us, going the other way. A good-looking, well-dressed woman is seated in the vehicle, reclining comfortably. She smiles and waves a gloved hand at Petrus. To my surprise, my always-so-courteous cousin does not remove his hat, even though I’m certain he has seen her. Curious, I ask him, “Why aren’t you greeting that pretty lady, Petrus? She’s smiling at you”.

“*Ma petite*,” he replies – we are speaking French because his Russian is not much better than the smattering of Polish I have learned from my mother – “That woman is no lady”.

“Oh,” I say naïvely, “I understand; she’s a *cocotte*”.

“My God,” laughs Petrus, “What do they teach young girls these days?”

Changing his tone, he continues, “Remember, Eugénie, a gentleman never bows to a *demi-mondaine* when he has a lady at his side”.

“But I’m not a lady,” I rejoinder. “Papa says I’m just a young chit of a girl”.

Petrus turns to me. He’s no longer smiling when he says, “My dear child, you have the privilege of being born a lady. Whatever life has in store for you, whatever the circumstances in which you find yourself, never forget that that is

what you are and conduct yourself accordingly at all times. Promise me that”.

Perplexed by his sudden seriousness, naturally I promptly promise.

After four months, Cousin Petrus has had enough of all the little pleasures St Petersburg has to offer. He leaves for the Trans-Caspian province. Before the year is over, he sends my father a long letter in which he writes about the almost-completed excavations. He still wants to visit Bukhara and Persia before returning to Lithuania. The letter is followed by a chest containing two beautiful silk carpets for my parents, a gold necklace for Olga and a bejewelled antique slave bracelet for his “sweet little Eugénie”. It fascinates me and I fantasise about the woman who wore this piece of jewellery many centuries ago: was she young and beautiful? Whom did she love and how did she die? I have always kept the bracelet and worn it frequently.

Years later, while flicking through an American magazine about excavations in Central Asia, an article catches my eye. One of the photos shows a tall man in a white keel, standing on a big block of stone, with two men next to him in exotic robes and tall fur hats. I recognise Petrus. The caption says, “The famous archaeologist, Count Petrus Movicz, in the former emirate of Bukhara, exploring the ruins of Margiana, a fabled city of antiquity”. I read the article avidly and immediately write to the magazine’s publisher, asking to be put in contact with the author. Months later, I receive a polite response. They are unable to trace the writer of the piece and the Polish archaeologist in the photo died in 1960 in Berkeley, in the state of California. I don’t know whether

Petrus was a religious man, but for the sake of piety I have a mass said for the peace of his soul. He is, after all, the first man who made my heart beat faster as a young girl.

Each summer, we exchange St Petersburg for Klyuchi, my grandmother’s estate in the province of Samara, in the southern delta of the Volga. This is traditionally an agricultural region, known for its fertile *chernozem*, or “black soil”. Klyuchi means “springs” and the name is derived from the water pumped to the surface of the earth through wooden pipes, some two and a half kilometres from the house. Even on the hottest summer day it’s still ice cold. With its slightly metallic taste, this water is considered by the villagers to be a cure-all for numerous ailments.

The water pipes run through a nursery belonging to the estate, which also includes a greenhouse in which grapes, peaches and apricots are grown. A gardener and his wife manage the nursery, which bears the name of Rodnik (well) and is my grandmother’s pride and joy. She imports seeds from abroad and grows artichokes, asparagus and other vegetables that can only be bought in delicatessens in the big cities at home. This home-grown produce is often of an excellent quality and she loves to serve her guests a meal of Dutch asparagus beans.

Klyuchi is everything you might imagine of an aristocratic estate: a beautiful park-like garden, a big orchard with all kinds of fruit and nut trees, a field of raspberry canes and gooseberry bushes and strawberry beds. We generally arrive in the second half of May, when everything is in full bloom. A playhouse has been built in the garden, where we keep toys and dolls and amuse ourselves when it rains.

When the weather is fine, though, we are outdoors all the time. We play tennis or croquet and I spend hours on the swing. When it's hot, we often swim in the Kinel, a tributary of the Volga, or go rowing. My trusty companion is Azor, our big, long-haired, black and white collie. I adore him and, at the end of the summer, it's always hard to say goodbye to him. Azor is a good swimmer and if he thinks I'm venturing too deep into the water, he grabs me by the scruff of the neck and tries to pull me ashore.

The Klyuchi livestock consists of cows, sheep, pigs and poultry. There is a donkey, which I am allowed to ride as a small girl, and, naturally, my grandmother has a stable with a number of beautiful horses. A little further on there is a dairy farm and, on the edge of the wood, an apiary. Wheat, rye and maize are grown in the fields.

All the same, Klyuchi is not really that large in comparison with the estates of some big landowners or those bought up from ruined nobles by ultra-rich grain merchants and industrialists. The wooden main building stands on a low hill surrounded by a copse and was designed in 1790 by Vasily Bazhenov, one of Catherine the Great's favourite architects. It looks out over a narrow valley, where two little villages lie, half-hidden behind a number of free-standing oaks. A church dome rises above the thatched roofs of the houses on the high banks of the Kinel.

Many memories of situations and events from my former life have faded. Strangely enough, though, when I look back on Klyuchi it's as if it were only yesterday. I can still clearly see every nook and cranny of the country house before me. Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I wander around that house in my mind. From my floral bedroom, decorated with Rus-

sian chintz, I walk down a narrow passageway to the main part of the building. Where there are no Aubusson or Persian rugs, I slide in my slippers over the brilliantly-polished parquet floors. I cross the stately, rather dark dining room to the drawing room, decorated in Victorian style with upholstered sofas and armchairs. We often sit in this cosy room of an evening and, on rainy days, we play Russian card games here, such as *durak* and *pyatnitsa*.

I linger here for a while, admiring Grandma's portrait hanging above the fireplace. It's a lovely pastel drawing. She's wearing a white ball gown with a rose corsage and her hair is piled high, with one thick ringlet falling over her bare shoulder. She looks down at me with friendly, intelligent eyes. Walking on, I enter the ballroom, decorated with gold and white marble. Four high windows on one side of the room offer a view of a wide garden path bordered with lilac bushes. My fingers run across the keys of the grand piano in the corner. I can see my grandma sitting at the keyboard, playing her favourite piece, Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

Maria Sergeyevna Neplyuyeva, née Urusova, is what we, in Russia, call a *knyaginya*, a princess. We affectionately refer to her as "Babu", from *babushka*, grandma. She, indeed, used to be an excellent pianist. In the prestigious Smolny Institute for the daughters of nobleman in St Petersburg, where she went to school, she even played for Nicholas I. It was whispered that the emperor let his eyes linger a little too long on the sweet young girl and that his hands pressed her fingers, which had flown so deftly over the piano keys, slightly too long and too hard after she finished. Nicholas I had an eye for beautiful women.

Back in the salon, I emerge through another door onto the

veranda. A couple of steps take me into the garden. I follow a small sandy path leading to a birch wood. In the early spring, a veil of tender green covers the silver-white branches. In the autumn, in their glowing, golden gowns, the trees are enchanting. There, on a bench in the light of the setting sun, I like to dream about love and future happiness. Babu often comes and sits with me, putting her arm around me, listening to my outpourings, giving advice and sometimes telling of her own youth. At such moments, I feel intimately connected to her.

Babu is over eighty, although she doesn't look it. She still cuts a tall, slender figure with a finely-chiselled countenance and a clear eye. She might live in the countryside all year long, leading a secluded life, but she has retained her elegance and dignity as a 'grande dame'.

Babu devotes plenty of care and attention to her appearance and dresses tastefully. Her white, grey and mauve gowns are sent from the capital. In my memory, a kind of very stylish widow's cap of fine, embroidered lacework covers her silver-grey hair. Her entire appearance exudes a serene calm and she never loses her temper, even with the servants. No wonder everyone treats my darling old Babu with such respect.

She loves to talk about her years at the Smolny Institute, but she never speaks of her life as a married woman. What I know about it, I have learnt from Papa and Aunt Sophie, his elder sister. Six months before she passes her school diploma, Maria Sergeyevna's mother suddenly announces that, today, she will meet her future husband, who has travelled to St Petersburg for the occasion. The brusqueness of this announcement does not trouble her. She's all too familiar

with her father's despotic character and is aware that she will not be allowed to choose her own spouse. Perhaps she's even relieved at the prospect of being able to stay in Russia and not, like one of her classmates, having to pine away the rest of her life in a semi-dilapidated *Schloss* in Thüringen, at the side of some German baron.

The marriage is celebrated in St Petersburg with much pomp and ceremony, attracting a great deal of attention. The father of the young bride, Prince Sergei Urusov, is a favourite of Nicholas I. The bridegroom, Alexander Neplyuyev, is a court chamberlain. The czar and various other members of the imperial family come to the reception to congratulate the newlyweds. They honeymoon in Paris.

My grandfather is no saint. He likes fast women and fast horses. Horses are also, incidentally, Babu's great passion. She masters the art of riding like a veritable Amazon. Her husband begins a long affair with a lady whose favours he shares with various Grand Dukes. His wife stubbornly refuses to listen to venomous insinuations. She is, undoubtedly, aware of her husband's indiscretions, but makes no scenes. She's far too well bred for that.

Their marriage produces three children: a daughter (my Aunt Sophie), then my father and, finally, a second son. The family is not spared disaster. An unexpected storm swells up during a sailing trip on the Mediterranean near Nice and Babu's husband and younger son, just fifteen, are drowned. By that time, Sophie is already married. My father has also already left home, having just finished his training in the Page Corps, and is billeted with the guard troops.

The dramatic accident leads Babu to break her connec-

tions with St Petersburg society and retire to her estate. Although my grandfather had extremely expensive tastes and costly habits, he leaves Klyuchi, which was Babu's dowry, free of mortgage and in an excellent state of repair.

As a widow, grandma is still an attractive prospect. She receives several proposals of marriage, but tactfully declines them all. Even her greatest admirer, Boris Ivanovich Chemadurov, has not the slightest chance. This charming, high-born nobleman nonetheless remains faithful and dedicated to her his whole life long. Each winter and summer he spends a couple of weeks at Klyuchi. He helps Babu run the estate and, if ever there are any problems, she can go to him for assistance and sound advice. Once, when Mama plucked up the courage to ask her why she refused to remarry and become the wife of the kindly Boris Ivanovich, my grandma answered her with a sad laugh, "My dearest Yadi, marriage is a gamble. You never know what cards you will be dealt. I prefer not to take any chances".

## II

# DISTANT WAR, NEARBY TROUBLES

The future cannot, indeed, be predicted. In early 1904, Russia's long-term expansionism in the Far East is punished by Japan, in a surprise attack on the Russian fleet in Port Arthur. The war has dramatic consequences for our country. The armed combat may be taking place many thousands of kilometres from the capital, but bad news flows into the headquarters of the General Staff on a daily basis.

Suddenly, Papa is almost always away, busy with consultations, hearings and receiving or sending official military reports and messages. When he comes home from the ministry, he's tired and sullen. He's taking the Russian losses very badly and his national pride is seriously bruised by the humiliating blows we are receiving at the hands of the Japanese. Mama is not often home either. She spends long hours in the workrooms the empress has set up in the Winter Palace, rolling bandages and sewing hospital gowns for wounded soldiers, together with other ladies from the highest circles.

At the end of 1904, Port Arthur capitulates and, two months later, the Russians lose the decisive battle at Mukden, in Manchuria. In mid-May, the Baltic Fleet, sent to Vladivostok to