Screenplay for the film "1951 — Native Blood. Vertinsky and others. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI.

Screenplay Summary:

The text opens in 1951 in Ulyanovsk, formerly Simbirsk, where a ruined church turned into a factory stands as a bitter symbol of Soviet reality: an altar pierced by chimneys spewing slag into a courtyard of wooden houses. In one such house live Nina Alexeyevna Krivosheina and her fifteen-year-old son Nikita, recently returned from Paris. They have been evicted from their previous room, denounced by neighbors for speaking French at home. Colonel Fyodorov, head of the housing department, secures them a miserable kitchen to live in—but also shows them the pile of denunciations written against them.

From this intimate starting point, the narrative pulls back to the broader history of the Russian emigration in France. After the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, tens of thousands of Russians fled. During World War II, many of these émigrés joined the French Resistance. The text recalls courageous figures such as Prince Obolensky and his wife Vera, executed by guillotine in Berlin, and Nicolas Vyrubov, a Free French officer decorated with all major French military orders. The Nazi invasion of the USSR in 1941 profoundly shakes the attitudes of many émigrés: their Russian patriotism reawakens, and their relationship to Soviet power becomes more ambiguous. Even Christian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev eventually declares that Soviet power has become, for better or worse, "the only Russian national authority."

In this climate, the 1946 Soviet decree offering to restore citizenship to Russian émigrés in France and issue Soviet passports acts as a trap. Fascinated by the idea of return and by the victory over fascism, around ten thousand émigrés apply for Soviet passports, utterly unaware of the reality of Stalin's regime. The Union of Russian Patriots transforms into the Union of Soviet Citizens; the Soviet ambassador Bogomolov and then Molotov receive these exiles at the embassy, answering their questions with vague promises and half-truths about their future rights.

However, the onset of the Cold War quickly alters the situation. In 1947, on the orders of French Interior Minister Jules Moch, 24 leading activists of the Union of Soviet Citizens are arrested, sent to the Soviet zone in Germany, and from there transported in freight cars to the USSR. The case of Grigory Tovstoles, sentenced by a Soviet military tribunal at Moabit prison to twenty-five years in the camps, becomes emblematic. In the same train to the camps travel Alexander Ugrimov and Igor Krivoshein, both former members of the Resistance and sons of men who had contributed to Russia's economic modernization before 1917.

The text also follows the fate of women bound up in these movements: wives of Soviet prisoners of war, like the Frenchwoman Renée Claude, stranded and abandoned in rural Russia; wives of re-emigrants who follow their husbands into the USSR "like the wives of the Decembrists," with children in tow, stepping into a country that is, in practice, hostile and incomprehensible.

Parallel to this, the author traces the trajectory of Alexander Vertinsky, the famous singer who returned from exile in Shanghai after being deeply moved by the Soviet victory at Stalingrad. His endless tours through a devastated country, chronicled in ironic and sorrowful letters, provide a

second lens on Soviet postwar life: unheated theatres, half-frozen audiences, chronic shortages, drunken miners, and a state that simultaneously honors and erases him. He receives the Stalin Prize, but not for his songs—rather for an unremarkable film role. His records are pressed for export, not for Soviet sale; he is kept off the radio, ignored by critics. In his final letters, he writes that he goes on living only for the sake of his wife and daughters. He dies on tour in Leningrad, fulfilling his wish not to die at home before his family.

The narrative then returns to the Krivoshein family in Ulyanovsk. The city is described as a ruinous landscape: houses unrepaired since 1917, collapsed balconies, shortages of basic goods, and purgatorial infrastructure such as ox-drawn sewage wagons. Everyday speech is drenched in Stalinist penal slang—"I'd give him 25 years"—to the point that threats like "I'll kill you" become commonplace, especially toward children. Nina, daughter of Aleksei Meshchersky—industrialist, "Russian Ford," and author of pre-1914 plans to relocate heavy industry beyond the Urals—is reduced to selling off their last Parisian possessions at the flea market, "eating the wardrobe," accepting alms, and working as a reader for blind students or ticket seller in a park riddled with drunkenness and knife fights. Her son Nikita, educated at a good Paris school, must quit the fee-based Soviet school, work at a factory, and attend night classes. One day, after six months without meat, he bursts into tears at the sight of a single pork cutlet before managing to eat it.

Gradually, Nikita escapes Ulyanovsk, fights his way into the Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages, and becomes a journalist for the magazine Novoye Vremya. After publishing an article in Le Monde about the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956, he is arrested in 1957 and sent to the Mordovian camps. Released in the 1960s, he requests permission each year to visit relatives in Paris—always refused. In 1970, he is told he may emigrate permanently if he applies to leave. His parents insist he must go. His father visits him in Paris in 1973, then returns to the USSR.

When the father comes back, Soviet officials are stunned that he has returned at all—revealing that the state has no desire to keep this family. On the very day that Alexander Solzhenitsyn is expelled from the USSR, the Krivosheins receive a postcard summoning them to collect their foreign passports. At Solzhenitsyn's urging, Nina writes her memoirs. Igor Krivoshein is publicly rehabilitated by the French authorities, who overturn his 1947 expulsion order and express regret. Nikita, finally, brings a wife from the USSR, Ksenia, whose grandfather had once courted Nikita's aunt before World War I. An old photo of him sketching her in Crimea in 1913 quietly closes the circle, linking pre-revolutionary Russia to the long, tragic arc of the twentieth century.

Screenplay:

1951 – Alexander Vertinsky

Today, in the center of the city of Ulyanovsk, formerly Simbirsk, on Soviet Street, stands the Lenin Memorial. In 1951, in its place still stood the Church of St. Elias. In 1951, only the walls of the Elias Church remained. Inside the church there is a knitwear factory. Above the former altar rises a 20-meter factory chimney. Day and night slag flies out of it. A second, shorter chimney is lower down, directly in the altar area, sticking out sideways. Slag flies out of this chimney too. Straight

into the courtyard with residential houses. Some people, passing through the courtyard, stop in front of the former altar, that is, in front of the slag chimney, and make the sign of the cross.

In one of these old wooden houses, in what used to be the kitchen, lives Nina Alexeyevna Krivosheina with her fifteen-year-old son Nikita. The chance to live in this kitchen is a great piece of luck. From the room where they used to live, on Ryleyev Street, they were evicted. Although, perhaps, that is for the best. The neighbors who lived behind the plywood partition used to inform on the Krivosheins. The head of the housing department, Colonel Fyodorov, who helped the Krivosheins get their new place, said it quite directly:
“Yes, this kitchen is rather awful. But move in, move in. At least here you’ll live entirely separate from the neighbors.”
And then Colonel Fyodorov bursts out:
“Do you want me to show you all the denunciations the neighbors wrote about you? Here they are, in my drawer. Here, at least this one: when your son comes home, you speak French with him. Your neighbor writes that this is bad, because he doesn’t understand what you’re saying and therefore can’t report anything.”

Nina Alexeyevna Krivosheina really does speak French with her son. They came to Ulyanovsk from Paris three years ago.

On June 22, 1946, in the Paris newspaper *Russian News*, a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR was published: “On the restoration of USSR citizenship to subjects of the former Russian Empire, as well as persons who have lost Soviet citizenship and reside on the territory of France.” The Russian emigration was entirely political. It had been provoked by the Bolshevik coup of 1917. But the war and the victory of the USSR over fascism made a tremendous impression on the Russian émigrés. Many believed that a new era had begun, that changes would soon start inside the Soviet Union itself. The decree of the Supreme Soviet stirred their souls. Many dreamed of Soviet passports. The emigration split. To return or to remain? The split ran even within families.

In form, the decree on the restoration of citizenship had a purely propagandistic character. In essence, it was Stalin’s revenge on those who had escaped from him in the 1920s and 1930s. Now he lured them into a mousetrap. They went. Instead of cheese—love of the Motherland. The new passports were issued at the Soviet consulate on Boulevard Malesherbes.

Applications to renounce the old passport could be submitted at the Soviet Embassy in France until November 1, 1946. That is, émigrés of the first wave, people who had not been in their homeland for a quarter of a century, were given only four months to make a truly fateful decision for themselves and their children. After the war, the Russian emigration in France numbered about 65,000 people. Around 10,000 received Soviet passports. In fact, this story begins earlier, during the war. The Russian emigration took an active part in the *Résistance*, the French Resistance movement. Many died, were executed. The husband of Nina Krivosheina, Igor Krivoshein, living in Ulyanovsk in 1951, was a member of the Resistance. In the summer of 1944 he was arrested and sent to the Buchenwald concentration camp. He was liberated by the Allies.

Even during the liberation of Paris, the Russian Resistance organization, the Union of Russian Patriots, came out of the underground and began open activity. Its address was 4, rue Galliera. Branches of the Union of Russian Patriots sprang up all over France. Everywhere there were meetings, lectures, talks. All on one theme: the USSR and its achievements. The war and the victory

over fascism shifted all the accents in the perception of Soviet power. For many Russian émigrés this happened precisely on June 22, 1941. On that day, Prince Obolensky came to the Soviet ambassador Bogomolov and asked to be sent to his homeland so that he could join the Red Army. That was impossible. Prince Nikolai Alexandrovich Obolensky had been a member of the Resistance even before June 22, 1941. That is, Prince Obolensky was fighting fascism at a time when the USSR was still living under the sign of the friendship pact with Nazi Germany. He would end up in Buchenwald. Later he would become a priest.

His wife, a member of the Resistance, Vera, or Vicky Obolenskaya, would be guillotined in Berlin in 1944, in the Plötzensee prison. At the Russian cemetery of Sainte-Geneviève-des-Bois there is a memorial plaque to her.

Nikolai Vyrubov begged to be taken into the Red Army or at least to be allowed to dig trenches—but on Russian soil. It didn't work out. Since 1940, Nikolai Vyrubov had been in the ranks of the anti-fascist army "Fighting France," the Forces Françaises Libres. A companion of de Gaulle, he would be awarded all the French military orders.

On June 22, 1941, arrests began among the Russian émigrés. The Gestapo would enter their apartments with the words:
"Are you Russian?"
"Yes."
"Then you are under arrest."
They were taken a hundred kilometers from Paris to the camp in Compiègne. There, in the camp, among Russians who had once belonged to the same émigré milieu, the fiercest arguments raged day and night. Feelings ranged from gloating over the retreat of the Red Army to the deepest Russian, virtually Soviet, patriotism.

For many, this patriotism, against the backdrop of the Great Patriotic War, was the beginning of the road into the French Resistance—and beyond.

In February 1945, after the liberation of Paris, a group of prominent figures of the Russian emigration met with the Soviet ambassador Bogomolov. They declared that they were ready to revise their former attitude towards the USSR. There was much talk in émigré circles about this visit, and simply fantastic rumors circulated.

Then a patriotic statement was made by none other than Nikolai Berdyaev, who had been expelled from the USSR in 1922 on the "philosophers' ship." Berdyaev said:
"The invasion of the Germans into Russian soil shook the depths of my being. The patriotism inherent in me reached its ultimate tension. Soviet power is the only Russian national power, there is no other. One must experience the fate of the Russian people as one's own fate."

After Berdyaev's statement, his neighbor in the Paris suburb of Clamart, Nikolai Simonov, broke off all relations with him. A hereditary Russian officer, Nikolai Simonov was a relative, on his father's side, of the Soviet poet Konstantin Simonov. Konstantin Simonov went to France in 1946, trying to meet his French relative. The latter categorically refused. Simonov had been sent to France to persuade the Russian writer and Nobel laureate Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin to return to his homeland. In those days, people in Paris talked a lot about Bunin supposedly warming to the Soviet embassy, that he had softened in his rejection of Bolshevism.

Simonov met Bunin several times. At first at the restaurant “Lapérouse” on the Seine, then in places Bunin preferred. They talked at length. Years later, Simonov would say:
“No, Bunin would never have returned to Russia. It’s nonsense that he changed his position; he didn’t change anything.”

But for many Russian émigrés, that was a time of great confusion. For many years they had lived with the feeling that their separation from their homeland was temporary. They lived, as they say, “on their suitcases.” Then, two decades after the October coup, that feeling of the “temporary” nature of emigration began to disappear. They more or less came to terms with life outside Russia, with the irretrievability of Russia, and managed, in one way or another, to fit into a foreign life. And then came the war and victory, and with them the rekindled hope of restoring ties with the homeland.

They had always loved Russia with that particular intensity that only separation can give. This beloved Russia had won a great victory over fascism. And it became impossible to separate this beloved Russia from Stalin’s Russia. Everything suddenly became confused.

While in the postwar USSR, in accordance with the new great-power, nationalistic tone, the word “Soviet” was increasingly replaced by the word “Russian,” in Paris many began to call “Soviet” what had previously been called “Russian.” Alexander Ugrimov, who as a child had been expelled with his parents on the same “philosophers’ ship” as Berdyaev, said:
“Now, after the victory, a brilliant period of flowering of all the creative forces of the people must come in Russia. To give now all my strength, all my knowledge to this heroic homeland—that is my wish.”

Not departed, but expelled from his homeland, Alexander Ugrimov went on:

“And I had another feeling, characteristic of many—a sense of guilt, of indebtedness to Russia, to the Russian people. Apparently such a feeling is the legacy of the enlightened nobility of the 19th century.”

At this moment Stalin’s decree on the possibility of obtaining Soviet citizenship appears. In 1947, the Union of Russian Patriots is transformed into the Union of Soviet Citizens. These new Soviet citizens, with thirty years of émigré past, who have no idea of real life in the USSR, are invited to receptions at the Soviet embassy. Ambassador Bogomolov meets them at the top of the grand staircase. Next to him is his wife, very well but modestly dressed, speaking French. Everyone likes her very much. Many questions are put to Bogomolov. For example, whether, once they have returned to their homeland, they will be able to visit relatives who remain in France. To his credit, the ambassador, when asked this, stayed silent for a long time. Then he said:
“It is unlikely that this will be possible at the very beginning.”

In July 1947, Molotov was in Paris. He received a large group of émigrés at the embassy on Rue de Grenelle.
“It may happen,” sighed Molotov, “that those who return to their homeland will be reproached for their émigré past. What can one do! In such cases, turn to me.”

Re-emigration began little by little, timidly. In one of the Russian homes in Paris they received a postcard from a relative who had gone to the USSR two months earlier. He wrote to his sister:
“We are definitely waiting for you! As soon as you marry off Masha, come to us.”
But Masha was then two years old.

Many holders of the new Soviet passports had not yet managed to apply to leave. It was a time of last doubts. Reflections on whether to go or not were cut short by the French authorities. By order of the Minister of the Interior, Jules Moch, in November 1947, 24 of the most active members of the Union of Soviet Citizens were arrested. First, this organization, with branches throughout France, had an overtly political character and aroused suspicion. Second, it was a gesture by the French authorities toward the French communists, who had been extremely active since the war. And besides, the turning point for many in the Russian emigration coincided with the beginning of the Cold War. They were not given time to think. The arrested Russian émigrés, holders of Soviet passports, were taken to the Soviet zone in Germany and from there—by freight cars—to the USSR.

There were entirely concentrated, emblematic cases. In 1951, the Russian émigré Grigory Nikolayevich Tovstoles was arrested in Paris by the French authorities, deported to the Soviet sector of Berlin, and two days later found himself in the Moabit prison, where under Nazism the German communist Ernst Thälmann and the Tatar poet Musa Jalil had been held. Within the walls of Moabit, a Soviet military tribunal sentenced the émigré Tovstoles, expelled by the French, to 25 years in the camps. In a cattle wagon he was taken to Taishet. Acquaintances, learning what had happened to him, said:
“He returned to his homeland for twenty-five years.”

Alexander Ugrimov recalls:
“At train stops, peasant women selling milk would come up. They asked: ‘Who are you?’ When we answered, ‘Russians,’ they didn’t believe us and laughed: ‘You don’t look like Russians. Russians aren’t like that.’”
In the same freight car traveled Igor Krivoshein. He had only recently recovered after Buchenwald. Before the Resistance, before his work as an engineer in Paris, he had been in Crimea in the ranks of Wrangel’s army. He was the son of Alexander Vasilievich Krivoshein, head of Wrangel’s government in Crimea, a professional economist working on that last piece of Russia free from the Bolsheviks. He had enormous experience. He had been Minister of Agriculture in Stolypin’s government at the moment of the famous agrarian reform. Pyotr Arkadyevich Stolypin was assassinated in Russia in 1911. Alexander Vasilievich Krivoshein died in Berlin in the early years of emigration. His son, with a Soviet passport, was going to the USSR. After these men—whom, in their homeland, people did not even recognize as Russians—their wives and children would come separately. These women were from good, well-off families, with or without titles, excellently educated, now no longer young and already tired. They had undergone the difficult school of emigration, they had worked and fought in a foreign country on an equal footing with their husbands. And now, according to Russian tradition, they went wherever their husbands went.

Some were driven by an independent desire to return at any cost to the land of their fathers who now lay in foreign soil. Others went after husbands who had been expelled, like the wives of the Decembrists once did, knowing, and even more feeling, where they were going and to what. And all of them went with children.

At the same time, parallel to this so-called re-emigration, repatriation was under way—that is, the return to the USSR of Soviet prisoners of war and people deported for forced labor in the Third Reich. Women who had married Soviet prisoners went with them to their homeland. Their husbands, upon arrival, usually ended up in the camps. The wives, with their children, in a foreign country, without language, were left to themselves.

The husband of the Frenchwoman Renée Claude Villanche did not end up in a camp. He simply abandoned her with their three daughters, and sold and drank away the property brought from France. She found herself in a village in the Kursk region.

By a miraculous coincidence, when she arrived in the USSR, they did not take away her French passport. After her husband abandoned her, she decided to return to France. The neighbors in the village advised her to go to Moscow: there was a French embassy there. “Maybe,” they said, “you’ll be able to go home.”

By making her way from place to place, she got to Moscow. She did not speak Russian and scarcely understood it. Incredibly, she managed to get an audience at the French embassy. The embassy told her that returning was impossible and took away her French documents.

She went back to the village. The MGB came, interrogated her, threatened her. Then they gave her a Soviet passport. She lived that way her whole life.

Shortly before the start of re-emigration, in Paris and elsewhere, records of Alexander Vertinsky appeared for sale—records published in the USSR.

Before the war, Vertinsky, an émigré, was listened to in secret. Composer Nikita Bogoslovsky recalls:
“His records were brought in from abroad by contraband and let people listen to them. But they were selective about whom they allowed to listen. Because if a person became too enthusiastic about Vertinsky, he could end up in prison.”
After the war, after his return, his records still were not sold in the USSR. They were produced and sold in the West. In the West it seemed to be a sign of new times: the long-time émigré Alexander Vertinsky had returned to his homeland and was giving concerts. He had been so shaken by the victory of the Russians at Stalingrad that he had asked for permission to return to the USSR. It had been granted. And he sang in his homeland.

Actor Vladlen Davydov of the Moscow Art Theatre, at the time a student of the MXAT school in 1944, recalls:
“I went to one of his first concerts. A man in a dark blue tailcoat comes out. The hall falls silent. And he quietly, almost intimately, announces: ‘The Moldavian steppe.’ And a mysterious action begins. Vertinsky is from that shore, from that world. From old Russia, from the Silver Age. And we see him… Later, when Vertinsky had already lived in our country, in his homeland, and had traveled around almost the entire country, ironic notes appeared in his voice: ‘After all, you don’t really take me seriously.’”

From a letter of Vertinsky to his wife, May 22, 1951:
“So, everything is fine. The bed in the room is all right. I have a little cognac, and an interesting book at hand. Only it’s cold. The art of which I am the sower is freezing. Unheated theatres with half-frozen spectators—all that reminds one a bit of a waxworks museum. I get a dubious pleasure from the pleasure of the spectators, who, in passing, have listened to some naïve nonsense about ‘beautiful feelings’ and then disperse under the hubbub, shaking their heads and smiling good-naturedly: ‘So there still are such oddballs!’ And these people go back to their kerosene stoves, their string bags, and their envious, spiteful, petty conversations.”

In earlier letters, the impressions were different.

Kharkov, August 1945:
“They received me with thunder, howls and screams. I tried to sing a song about the war. No one applauded. They don’t want to hear anything about the war. But everything else—on a roll!”

Vertinsky from Astrakhan:
“In the whole city, not a piece of meat. If you want soup, make it out of heavy industry.”

The harsh postwar life would pull away from his halls the public exhausted by the search for food. The intelligentsia would stay with him. In the years of the Cold War, Vertinsky’s concerts would create the feeling of a brief sortie beyond the Iron Curtain.

By 1951 he was very tired.
“Sick, I sing a concert and barely manage to pull it off. The shops are empty. There is nothing to eat. However, that doesn’t matter. I don’t want anything. I’ll ‘sing around the points.’ I’ll go to Khabarovsk. Then to Sakhalin. Then again to Khabarovsk. Then Chita, Ulan-Ude.”

He had returned from emigration, from Shanghai, with a young wife and a four-month-old daughter. He was 34 years older than his wife. Their second daughter was born to Vertinsky already in Moscow. Lidia Vertinskaya recalls:
“They brought me into the maternity ward and laid me down. The others found out that I was Vertinsky’s wife. I lay quietly, without groaning. A murmur went through the ward: ‘We’ve been lying here suffering for three days, and she arrives from abroad and gives birth as if nothing were the matter.’ A doctor came over with a notebook and started an interrogation: ‘What were your father and mother? Where did they serve? Do you have relatives abroad?’ This interrogation made my labor pains stronger. The senior doctor came over and whispered: ‘Bear it, it will all end well.’ Soon our second daughter, Nastya, was born.”

The new life to which Vertinsky had brought his family was hard, unpredictable, and very expensive. He was no longer young. His main thought was to secure the future of his family. His instrument was his voice. He gave concerts constantly. As much as his health allowed, and despite his health.

“I am a man and can sleep on hard beds, and not wash for weeks, and eat whatever comes—I am used to everything and know how to keep silent and smoke when nothing can be changed. My life is a struggle for money, for your future, and that of the children, and mine. And I’m not as much of a neurotic as you think,” he wrote in a letter to his wife dated July 12, 1946.

He traveled across the country back and forth on tour. Up to 24 concerts a month. His wife Lidia writes:
“In Shanghai he was a healthy, lively and cheerful man. Here the Touring Bureau exploits him ruthlessly, and he has begun to fail.”
The Touring Bureau took the lion’s share of his earnings. He called his endless tours his “ice march.” Yes, he moved around the country and sang despite the frosts and unheated provincial halls. But it was not only that. For Vertinsky, the parallel with the other tragic “Ice March” came naturally—the one undertaken by the barefoot, ragged White Volunteer Army of Kornilov, Denikin, and Markov in 1918, in a desperate attempt to win Russia back and return to Russia. In the USSR, no one remembered or knew anything about that “Ice March.” It existed only in the historical memory of the Russian emigration. Vertinsky took the phrase “ice march” precisely from that memory.

For fourteen years after returning to his homeland, Vertinsky toured without rest. He saw and knew the country. Moreover, he felt guilt toward it.

From a letter after concerts in Kuzbass:
“You can’t imagine! The water is black like ink. You cannot wash. Out of thousands of chimneys day and night bursts a caustic yellow smoke. There is nothing to eat. You can’t drink the water. The miners have plenty of money. But what can they do with it? They drink… There is no vodka. So they drink cognac, which is specially sent there. And at my concerts they are already drunk. Depending on their mood, they either swear or cry. Sometimes behind the scenes they say: ‘May I kiss your hand?’ And there is five percent intelligentsia.”

Vertinsky was sustained by the rich school he had passed through in émigré restaurants. He would write in his memoirs:
“To have success in a cabaret is far more difficult than in a theatre. In a cabaret, regardless of whether they listen to you or not, you must sing. And I sang. Through wounded pride, through insults, through disgust. I sang precisely and firmly, without seeking moods and without getting upset. Like a man at his post. I had success or did not have success. That did not depend on me, but simply on the composition of the public.”

In 1951, Vertinsky received the Stalin Prize. The prize was given for his role in the unsuccessful film *The Conspiracy of the Doomed*, and not for his songs.

In 1956, Vertinsky wrote a letter to the Deputy Minister of Culture, Kaftanov:
“I am in my 68th year. I am at sunset. I have a worldwide name. But I am a Russian man. And a Soviet man. So I want to ask you a number of questions: Why do I not sing on the radio? Why are there no records of mine? Why are there no scores or verses of mine? Why, in 13 years, has there not been a single review of my concerts? I am, actually, not asking anything of you. I have grown cold to everything.”

In that same 1956, he wrote to his wife:
“You know, Lilichka, I have understood that our only salvation lies in work. It is very hard to live in our country. And if the thought of you and the children did not hold me, I would long ago have either poisoned myself or shot myself.”

And six months later he died. Vertinsky had often said that he would like to die not at home, so that his loved ones would not see the “kitchen of death.” That came true as he wished. He died in Leningrad, during an ordinary concert tour.

In fact, by Soviet standards, Vertinsky had a happy fate in his homeland. He was free, and he had lived to see the country to which he had wanted to return. Igor Krivoshein, who had come from Paris, had already been under arrest for two years in 1951 and sentenced to ten years. He was in the Marfino sharashka, which Solzhenitsyn would later write about in *The First Circle*. Alexander Ugrimov, who had come to the USSR together with Krivoshein, had already been in a camp for three years, in a mine in Vorkuta. His wife, Irina Nikolayevna Ugrimova, went to her homeland against her convictions. She had not wanted to return to the USSR. She went after her husband.

She was arrested at her sister’s dacha near Moscow, at Nikolina Gora. Her daughter was taken from her and sent to an orphanage. Irina Nikolayevna met her husband at a transit prison in Kirov. She simply said to him: “You see, I was right.” Later, recalling all the investigators, prosecutors and guards he had seen, Ugrimov would say of them and of himself:

“Oh, how funny and amusing it was for them to watch us, these naïve little animals—how hilarious we were in our behavior when they tied our tails together, took away our young, tortured us this way and that. Oh, how amusing! What a laugh!”

In 1951, Ugrimov’s wife Irina Nikolayevna was in a camp in Inta. The wife and son of Krivoshein were in Ulyanovsk.

They left their home on Rue Jean-Goujon, where they had lived for twenty years, taking with them not pots or pans but only three baskets of clothes—and found themselves in Ulyanovsk.

Nina Alexeyevna Krivosheina walks down the street. There is a scale standing on the road. Next to it a man. For fifty kopeks you can weigh yourself. Money is desperately precious, but she steps on the scale. Thirty-six kilograms. “Not far from a Buchenwald prisoner,” she thinks, and walks on.

She has no job. After the arrest of her husband, the former Buchenwald prisoner, she was fired from the pedagogical institute where, for a year after arriving from Paris, she had taught English and German.

Those who had returned from emigration were handled by the Ulyanovsk branch of the resettlement administration. It was headed by a female official named Zolinova. Nina Krivosheina writes:
“She could not hide her complete contempt for us, the re-émigrés. To distribute these *ci-devant*, these former people, these hateful, educated Parisians to the lowest jobs in town gave her tangible satisfaction.”

She offers Nina a job in the Night Watchmen Department. She proposes that Nina guard, in a sheepskin coat and with a rifle, the largest department store in Ulyanovsk, in the building of the former German church. Nina cannot bring herself to accept that offer. But some old woman agrees to it. A week later, bandits—of which Ulyanovsk was full—attack her, carve her up with knives, take the keys and rob the store.

Ulyanovsk was a terrible city in 1951. The houses had not been repaired once since 1917. Fences lay across the sidewalks. Balconies on the houses had collapsed. Nina writes:
“On the first day, when we had just arrived in Ulyanovsk, I thought the Germans must have had their way here during the war, that all around were traces of bombing. I said to the driver of the truck we were riding in: ‘Well, it seems the city was bombed many times; the traces are still there.’ He was silent for a long time, then answered: ‘No, no, no German has ever been here.’ And he added: ‘There was no bombing either.’”

It was impossible to buy a table, a chair, a pot, a pan or a glass in Ulyanovsk. Everything needed for normal human life was absent from the shops.

Toilets in the city were in the courtyards. From time to time an ashenization cart would appear: a cart drawn by an ox, a barrel on it, and a worker in an oilskin coat down to his heels with a hood, with a scoop and a bucket. People would stand guard for him in front of the house. One visit was free. For the second you had to pay. The neighbors of Nina, the chairman of the City Council’s financial department and his wife, well-off people, flatly refused to pay. “We don’t go to the yard,” they said, “we have a bucket in our room.”

Unemployed, Nina Krivosheina sold the last of their Parisian things at the flea market. This woman standing at the flea market came from a good family. Her father, Alexei Pavlovich Meshchersky, a graduate of the St. Petersburg Mining Institute, had been director of the Sormovo plant.

He was what we would now call a top manager, an organizer of production in Russian machine-building. He was the creator of an industrial concern composed of the Sormovo, Kolomna, Izhevsk and Beloretsk plants. He was already being called “the Russian Ford.” He was the author of a plan to move heavy industry beyond the Urals. He proposed it before the First World War. It would be implemented in emergency fashion during the Second World War. He was on the board of the Volga Steamship Company. Diesel steamers from his Sormovo plant plied the Volga. In his work he dealt with high-ranking state officials, governors, engineers and workers. He traveled widely across Russia and knew the country firsthand.

Alexei Meshchersky in industry, Alexander Krivoshein in the agrarian sphere—these are the men to whom Russia owes the sharp economic rise of the early 20th century. Their children, Nina and Igor, would join their lives already in emigration, in Paris. Before the revolution, back in St. Petersburg, the young composer Prokofiev had asked for Nina’s hand. It didn’t work out.

Now, standing at the Ulyanovsk flea market, Nina thinks:
“I am selling badly, everything at half price. And yet it is necessary to maintain everyday life so that my son Nikita feels we are living normally, that we have a chance to go on living.”

They sell a wardrobe that was made soon after their arrival from Paris. The wardrobe is loaded onto a hand cart, and Nikita pushes it to the commission shop. But the wardrobe is bought from him right on the street. You can’t buy furniture anywhere in Ulyanovsk. Now, when someone asks: “What do you live on?” Nina answers: “We are eating the wardrobe.”

Once, on Goncharovka Street, someone she knows gives Nina alms. She accepts with gratitude. Later, years afterward, she would say:
“I hid my proud manners and snobbery far away and for a long time that day. Poverty and humility go side by side. Together.”

And Nina’s neighbor, unembarrassed, loudly says about her, in her presence:
“Just look at that, this damned aristocrat has come to us to die of hunger.”

But then one of the few acquaintances advises her to go to Professor Lyubishchev of the Pedagogical Institute.

Nina tells her son that she is going to go ask strangers for help. Her son, raised in another life, says:
“Mother, how can you, uninvited, go to strange people? It’s terrible—what we’ve come to!”
But she, uninvited, goes, and in the Lyubishchev household she finds an outlet, a refuge, a place where she can speak a language she understands.

The ordinary language of the city at that time is rough and cynical. One of the characteristic expressions: “If it were up to me, I’d give him 25—he’d learn how to talk back to his grandfather.” And everyone knows that “25” is a sentence—25 years. Thus, the Stalinist penal vocabulary enters everyday Russian speech and the popular consciousness and becomes fixed there. The easy, casual expressions “I’ll kill you,” “killing you isn’t enough”—especially often said to children—are a greeting flown far into the future from Stalin’s past. Before Stalin, the Russian language knew nothing like this.

At Professor Lyubishchev’s house, Nina meets Nadezhda Mandelstam, the widow of the great Russian poet. She is in Ulyanovsk because she is forbidden to live in Moscow. Here they also help Nina find work: she becomes a reader for two blind students. They come every day, and she reads to them ten hours in a row, paid out of their meager student stipends.

She also sells tickets for rides in the city park of culture. In the park, beer and vodka are sold everywhere. Fights are everywhere. Knife fights. Many people die.

Nikita attends school as much as possible. It is the school where Lenin studied. In Paris, Nikita went to a good school and was well prepared. In Ulyanovsk, you have to pay to attend school. They have nothing to pay with. Nikita goes to work at a factory and to an evening school for working youth.

Nina Krivosheina recalls:
“Nikita had not eaten meat for half a year. One day at the market I quickly went up to the meat counter and, so as not to change my mind, bought a cutlet. Nikita came home from the factory, and I served him this cutlet with fried potatoes. He was taken aback and asked: ‘Mama, is this meat?’ He sat down, covered his face with his hands and began to cry loudly. He cried for a long time, the cutlet grew cold. Then he ate it and fell asleep.”

Nikita Krivoshein would break out of Ulyanovsk. He would go to Moscow and, after a struggle, be admitted to the Institute of Foreign Languages. Then Stalin would die. Nikita’s father would be released. The whole family would gather in Moscow. Nikita would go to work at the magazine *Novoye Vremya* (*New Times*). And after the anti-Soviet uprising in Hungary and its bloody suppression by Soviet troops, he would manage to publish in *Le Monde* an article about the Soviet intervention in Hungary. In 1957, Nikita Krivoshein was arrested and sent to the Mordovian camps. In the 1960s, after his release, he would annually request permission to visit relatives in Paris. He would be refused. And in 1970 he would be told:
“If you request permission to emigrate to France for permanent residence, we will let you go.”
His parents insisted that he leave. His father would visit him in Paris in 1973 and return to the USSR.

When he returned, the OVIR officials were surprised:
“What? You came back?”
And then the Krivosheins would realize that no one was holding them in their homeland. Moreover, no one would mind if they were no longer in the USSR. The postcard asking them to come pick up their foreign passports the Krivosheins would receive on the very day of Solzhenitsyn’s expulsion. At Solzhenitsyn’s insistence, Nina Alexeyevna Krivosheina would write her memoirs. Igor Alexandrovich Krivoshein would receive honors from the French authorities, official cancellation of the 1947 Ministry of the Interior decree expelling him, and expressions of regret. And Nikita Krivoshein would bring himself a wife from the USSR—Ksenia. Before the First World War, before everything, Ksenia’s grandfather had courted Nikita’s aunt. In an old family photograph he is drawing her in Crimea, in the last peaceful year of 1913.