

FLIGHT FROM WOLVES

In some measure, the river and the forest proved beneficial to our survival. There was no shortage of water, and occasionally I was able to catch fish. Woods provided us with firewood, mushrooms and berries. In the winter during milder temperatures, I spent considerable time hunting hares, but returned empty-handed most of the time.

Our kolchoz (collective farm) was situated halfway up the ridge of a hill. At the bottom of the hill, approximately three kilometres through the middle of the forest flowed the river *Irtish*. On a sunny and frosty day, I decided to go back to the woods to check my hare traps, which I had set up two days earlier. This time I took some extra snares that were made with a stronger wire. At the edge of the river was undergrowth of willow and birch trees, an area where hares liked to feed on the bark of these young trees. By running back and forth on the same trail, they created many distinct tracks. What I had to do was simply find a tree near the track and tie a snare to it, about eight inches off the ground. I had to make sure not to step on the track. It took me about two hours to set up all my extra snares, then I went towards the bend in the river where I had placed my other traps.

When I got there, I was delighted to find a beautiful, white Siberian hare caught in the snare. I did not want to advertise my catch, so I hid it under my coat. The problem was that his legs were so long, they protruded from the bottom of my jacket. My solution was to wrap the hare around my waist.

As I approached the riverbank, I was horrified to see a pack of wolves crossing the river from the other side. Frightened as I was, I still had the presence of mind to get rid of my precious possession. I tossed the hare up the tree, where he got wedged between the two branches. Then I fled the scene.

I figured that once the wolves got the scent of the hare, they would forget about me. But I made a mistake, taking a shortcut in my retreat instead of following an existing, albeit longer trail. In my flight, I had to deal with many obstacles, tumbling over logs, falling into craters deep in the snow made by uprooted trees. Even though the temperature was near -20°, I was sweating. I did not wish to slow down or stop for a rest for two reasons: I was afraid that my clothes might freeze, and it already was late. I worried that I might get lost in the impending darkness, which comes on fast in the woods. It was a darkness that transformed the forest into a nightmarish place with scares at every turn.

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It was a sight of relief when I saw a light twinkling above the tops of the trees. I knew then that the village was near.

The next day, I returned to the forest to recover my hare, and noticed numerous wolf tracks around the tree. Evidently, my decision to get rid of the hare the day before was a wise one.