

38 . *The Road of Life*

ON THE EVENING OF NOVEMBER 19 CAPTAIN MIKHAIL Murov and his transport regiment were working on the defense lines at Pulkovo Heights, just outside Leningrad, installing new barbed wire on the approaches to the pillboxes.

Night falls by 3 P.M. in Leningrad in November, and it was long past sunset when Murov got orders to bring his drivers immediately to the Leningrad freight station for transportation to some unknown destination. Murov was puzzled. He didn't know where the railroad could take his troops in the blockaded city, but he began to move them into Leningrad. Most were People's Volunteers, and he permitted those who had families in the city to dash home for a moment on the way to the station.

The troops marched through the wind-swept streets. Hardly a soul was visible. There was no sound but the distant rattle of guns, no light, and even the moon was in a dark phase. The men tramped through the shadows of ruined buildings, here a gaping window, there a sagging roof. Under their tough felt boots was the crunch of broken glass. Trolleycars and buses stood motionless in the snow like frozen dinosaurs. Leningrad seemed an abandoned city. Some men managed to see their families and snatch a brief, often despairing moment with them. Some did not.

At the freight station they joined units already assembled and were loaded aboard heatless cars in which cardboard and plywood panels replaced broken windows. The train jerked to a start and crawled through the darkness. It was morning before the troops debarked at the bomb-cratered fishing village of Kokkorevo on the frozen shores of Lake Ladoga. There an officer put Murov in charge of a sledge battalion, part of a column which was about to move across Ladoga and bring back to Leningrad its first supplies by ice road.

The plan for the ice road had taken form as early as mid-October. The Leningrad Military Council ordered Lieutenant General F. N. Lagunov, chief of rear services, to begin preparations at that time after the success

of the Nazi offensive under General Schmidt began to make it less and less likely that the circle around the city could be broken in the immediate future.

Lagunov was already engaged in improving the primitive Ladoga port facilities to increase the tonnage being carried across the capricious lake by the special Ladoga shipping flotilla. He had some twenty thousand workers building docks and warehouses at Osinovets and Kokkorevo on the Leningrad side and at Kobona, Lavrovo, Novaya Ladoga and Voibokalo on the eastern shore.

No one knew for certain whether an ice road could be built. Ladoga, or Lake Nevo as it was called in ancient times, was the biggest in Europe, although little known outside of Russia—125 miles long and nearly 80 miles across at its widest point. Its greatest depth was more than 700 feet, but in the southern part between Shlisselburg and Volkhov it was shallow, ranging from 60 to 150 feet deep.

Storms often swept the lake, particularly in autumn, when they might endure six or seven days. Lagunov could get little information about ice conditions. An observer who had spent thirty years tending a lighthouse on Sukho Island reported that he usually was cut off from the shore from the twentieth of October to the twentieth of January by alternately freezing and melting ice. The ice shifted and moved so often that it was too hazardous to attempt a crossing.

One Leningrad scientist worked out a formula on ice formation on the lake. At 23 degrees above zero 4 inches of ice would form in 64 hours; at 14 above 4 inches would form in 34 hours; at 5 above zero 4 inches in 23 hours. A foot of ice would be laid down in 24 days at 23 above. It would take 8 days to create a foot of ice at 5 above.

Four inches of ice could support a horse without a load. A horse pulling a sledge with a ton of freight required 7 inches of ice. A truck carrying a ton of freight needed 8 inches of ice.

Obviously, 8 inches of ice would be the required minimum for mass movement of supplies.

The inadequate statistics indicated that ice formation seldom began in the Shlisselburg gulf before November 19 and often not until early January. Once the ice formed, however, it usually reached a thickness of 3 to 5 feet—strong enough for almost any purpose.

The Russians had a good deal of experience in operating over ice. There had been ice offensives during the winter war with Finland, including an attack on Vyborg and a thirty-mile march over an ice road in the Ukhta area. Earlier, during the Civil War, trains had been operated on tracks laid across the Volga near Sviyazhsk, a crossing of about a mile. There had been an ice railroad across a corner of Lake Baikal when the Trans-Siberian was being built and one across the Kola River near Murmansk during World War I.

But none of these projects had the complexity—or the urgency—of the Ladoga route.

Ladoga had many special characteristics. For example, the level of the water varied enormously with the wind, and it might rise or fall from as much as a foot and a half to nearly four feet within a few hours—even in winter.

The projected route would be twenty to thirty miles long. It was linked at the Leningrad end to an old and poorly equipped branch railroad which in prewar days had been used for excursion traffic and little more. This line was thirty-five miles long and connected with five separate Leningrad depots.

The Leningrad Military Council on November 3 ordered that the road be put into operation over the lake as soon as the ice was hard enough. If the Ladoga ice road held a high priority before the fall of Tikhvin on November 8, it became vital after that date. There was no other possibility of providing Leningrad with the supplies for survival. To be sure, a few tons per day could be flown in, but this was not nearly enough for the defense forces, and the civilian population of more than 2,500,000 would die within a few weeks.

Nothing could be done while the lake was still unfrozen. But the fall of Tikhvin meant that a new land road must be built to Ladoga. The order for this route was issued by the Leningrad Military Council on November 8. It was to run from Novaya Ladoga through a series of unknown villages—Karpino, Yamskoye, Novinka, Yeremina Gora, Shugozero, Nikulskoye, Lakhta, Veliki Dvor and Serebryanskaya—to Zaborye. These peasant hamlets were so tiny they showed only on local maps. The road was to be finished within fifteen days, and the goal was to carry a minimum of 2,000 tons a day.¹

This route led for 220 miles along the old Yaroslavl tract, one of the ancient forest routes of old Russia. It wound through tamarack swamps, cranberry or *klutka* bogs, lakes and dense timber. Much of the region was hardly inhabited; much was sheer wilderness. The notion that it might be possible to maintain a flow of supplies along so tortuous a road in the dead of Russian winter with its exhausting toll on trucks, sledges and men was wildly optimistic. Yet there was no alternative. Build the road or die.

Peasants, collective farmers, Red Army rear troops, anyone available was put to work on the highway. Meantime, aerial reconnaissance was carried out from November 8 to 10 to study ice formation, which, early as it was for Ladoga, had already begun. The fliers reported ice starting to form throughout the southern part of the lake except for one large open field

¹ Pavlov, *op. cit.*, 3rd edition, p. 135; Saparov, *op. cit.*, p. 43; Kharitonov, *Voyenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal*, No. 11, November, 1966, p. 120. There is controversy as to the date the order for the road to Zaborye was issued. One account says the order was not approved until November 24 and that it was to be finished by November 30. (F. Lagunov, *Voyenno-Istoricheskii Zhurnal*, No. 12, December, 1964, p. 95.)

of water that cut right across the projected route. On the fifteenth a strong north wind set in. Observers reported that ice was strengthening rapidly throughout the southern area.

November 17 was gray, dark and bitter cold. The sun did not rise until well after 9 A.M. An hour earlier two reconnaissance groups had taken off across the young ice. One, headed by A. N. Stafeyev, tested the ice in the vicinity of Osinovets and Kokkorevo, the two ports on the Leningrad side. The other, led by Lieutenant Leonid N. Sokolov and including thirty men from the 88th Construction Battalion, moved out to check the route from Kokkorevo to the island of Zelenets and on to Kobona on the eastern shore. Each man wore white camouflage clothing and carried his own weapons and food. Each was equipped with ice tools, including axes and alpenstocks. They were roped together and some wore life belts. It was a hard struggle against the wind in the grim November day. They marked the route every one hundred yards with flagged stakes, to facilitate their return and to sight the future ice road. They found the ice averaging four inches thick—just about the minimum to support their movement.

The detachment had nearly reached mid-point when they encountered the first open water. They gingerly circled to the north and finally, after sloshing across a half-submerged ice field, they came out on firm ice again. One man, N. I. Astakhov, fell through, but was rescued. Hours went by. It was very slow going. On the shore Major A. S. Mozhayev waited nervously for their report. Finally Smolny called him. A report on the reconnaissance had been promised by 6 P.M. Where was it? Major Mozhayev gloomily said he was still waiting.

It was long after midnight before the reconnaissance group reached Kobona and 4 A.M. before Mozhayev was able to advise Party Secretary Zhdanov at Smolny that he had gotten a message from Sokolov, sent as they were nearing Kobona after a long detour to the north, expressing confidence that a route could be opened.

Major Mozhayev was unable to restrain himself. He mounted a gray mare and rode out across the ice, following the staked route of the advance party, and within four hours had arrived in Kobona, to the astonishment of his scouts. The ice was five to ten inches thick now, and the great *polyuzia* or open lake was rapidly shrinking. The temperature had dropped to about 8 degrees above zero.

On the nineteenth General Lagunov himself arrived at Kokkorevo. He took a local fisherman as a guide and moved off on the ice in a light M-1 scout car, following the flagged route. The car was not equipped for ice conditions; the wheels slipped and Lagunov had to travel slowly, paying close heed to cracks and ice trenches. But by late afternoon he was back in Leningrad and reporting in Smolny to Party Secretary Zhdanov that within a few days regular transport on the route would be possible. That evening after a sharp dispute between Zhdanov and Lagunov a decision

was approved by the Leningrad Military Council to open the road immediately.

It was this decision which had brought the orders, transferring Captain Murov and his men from the Pulkovo Heights to the Ladoga shores. There beside the frozen lake Murov inspected the supply team with some apprehension. Half the men had had no previous experience with horses. Among them were scientists and even artists. As for the horses, they were rags and bones, so weak they could hardly pull the empty sleighs. Murov's only hope was that on the other side of the lake, at Kobona, there might be oats or hay. Of course, it was not certain that the horses would make it across the lake. Many had not been winter-shod. Fortunately, a box of cleats was found in one of the sledges and some of the horses were shod.

As the caravan waited to take off, an officer, probably a political commissar, came up to Murov and told him that the ration had been reduced again in Leningrad. It had been cut that day, the twentieth, to 250 grams of bread a day for workers and 125 grams for all other individuals. The ration for front-line troops had been cut to 600 grams of bread from 800 on November 8. Now it was cut again to 500. All other troops were cut to 300 grams, about half a loaf.

"There are supplies in the city for two more days," the commissar said. "After that there is nothing more. The ice is very young and not very strong. But we can't wait. Each hour is dear."

A few moments later the detachment started over the gray ice. There were 350 drivers. Intervals of thirty to thirty-five yards separated each sledge, and the column stretched over a distance of possibly five miles. Near the shore stood General Lagunov, watching the take-off. He commented to Murov that his men were too lightly dressed. It was true. The temperature stood at zero. The men did not have heavy snow jackets. But nothing could be done about it. The column moved on. At its head rode Sokolov on a thin but lively white horse. The lake spread out endless and drab. Soon the horses were covered with hoarfrost.

The column moved steadily until it reached Kilometer 9, where a wide crevasse appeared. After an hour's search the scouts directed the sledges to the south. Occasionally the ice cracked under the horses. The sun, never high on the horizon, was slipping under again by the time the column reached the island of Zelenets, where a halt was called for two hours' rest. A ration of 800 grams of bread—nearly a week's supply for an ordinary Leningrader—was doled out along with tea with sugar. But there was no forage. Some drivers shared their bread with the horses. It was mid-evening before the convoy reached Kobona. There, as the sledges were loaded with flour and food concentrates, more food was supplied the drivers, including hardtack, sugar, macaroni and cottonseed-oil cakes. But again there was nothing for the horses. Murov was in despair. This could be fatal. He did not think the animals would survive 20 to 30 miles back over the ice with

loaded sledges. He remembered a trick of Civil War cavalry days and scraped back the snow, uncovering old grass for the horses. Many drivers gave their cottonteed-oil cakes to the horses.

In the dark early-morning hours the convoy reached the Leningrad side. The first few tons of food via ice road had arrived in Leningrad. Military Automobile Highway No. 101, the Road of Life, was open. It was the eighty-third day of the siege.

For several days most of the transport over the road was by horse sledge. In some places the ice was only seven or eight inches thick. General Lagunov assembled about 1,100 horses and sleighs. But he limited loads to 200 to 250 pounds during the initial phase. This was hardly a drop in the bucket compared with Leningrad's needs.

On the night of November 22 the first column of trucks, sixty in all, commanded by Major V. A. Porchunov, arrived on the western shore and on the twenty-third delivered thirty-three tons of flour to Leningrad. The next day only nineteen tons crossed the lake. Porchunov lost one 1½-ton truck and driver in the first crossing. Many trucks in the first days carried gasoline or kerosene to relieve Leningrad's desperate fuel shortage.

Though the ice road had been brought into being, it did not immediately promise to save Leningrad from starvation. On November 25 Leningrad received 70 tons of food; on November 26, 154 tons; on November 27, 126 tons; on November 28, 196 tons; and on November 29, 128 tons. On November 30 there was a thaw and only 62 tons crossed the lake. From November 23 to 30 the road delivered only 800 tons of flour—two days' supply at the barest starvation ration (Leningrad was now using only about 510 tons of flour a day). At this rate Leningrad would starve—only a bit more slowly. And in seven days forty trucks had gone to the bottom of the lake.

These shipments came from stores on hand at Novaya Ladoga. The forest haul over the rutted track from Zaboroye did not get started until December 6, despite every effort of the peasants and Red Army men. When finished the road was so narrow in many places that trucks could not pass. The haul from railroad to the Leningrad side of the lake required ten to twenty days. Trucks took two weeks to make the round trip from Zaboroye to Novaya Ladoga and back, averaging not more than twenty to twenty-five miles a day.

Party Secretary Zhdanov decided to send his fellow secretary, T. F. Shrykov, to Vologda, the control point for supplies to Ladoga. His task was to try to get food moving more rapidly. Shrykov arrived in Vologda November 25. The Vologda Party organization was providing substantial relief shipments of food to Leningrad. But the problem lay with forwarding food to the railroad at Zaboroye and a secondary base at nearby Podboroye.

After Shrykov revealed how critical the situation was, the Vologda officials attempted to speed up shipments. The operation of the railroad had been hampered by lack of fuel. City and village residents were sent to the

forests to cut wood. They brought it in by the sledgeload for the locomotives. Normal railroad operations through Vologda were suspended to route supply trains straight through to the railheads. Leningrad supply trains got special numbers. They were all in the "97" series. The moment a "97" train halted at a station for fueling or watering, rail workers dropped all tasks to speed it on its way.

There were enormous losses of trucks in the early days. The road was often shelled and strafed by the Nazis. Kilometer No. 9 was a special danger point. There were cracks in the ice and unexpected weak spots. So many machines were lost that Zhdanov called a Military Council meeting and asked Lagunov, "Don't you think that we will lose all our transport and find ourselves without trucks?"

Lagunov said he had made arrangements with Vice Admiral F. I. Krylov to raise the sunken machines as soon as the ice thickened.

Even heavier loss of machines occurred on the abominable forest road to Zaboroye. In three days 350 trucks were abandoned in snowdrifts on the Novaya Ladoga-Yeremina Gora section. Two transport units lost 94 trucks, most of them running off the unmarked shoulders of the highway. The total losses on the ice and on the forest road were 1,004 machines. There was also the problem of maintenance. At one time, of 3,500 trucks engaged on the ice road 1,300 were out of service, awaiting repairs.

As the ice thickened, more and more trails were opened across the lake. By midwinter there were as many as sixty of these tracks with a total length of nearly a thousand miles.

But in December the route still worked slowly, slowly, slowly. It met neither the expectations of Zhdanov nor the needs of the city.

There was, however, the beginning of slight improvement from December 10 onward—and not because the trucks moved faster or ice conditions suddenly got better.

The improvement was due to the recapture of Tikhvin on December 9. On that day Leningrad had on hand nine or ten days' supply of flour, including all the remaining stores at Novaya Ladoga, on the eastern side of the lake. The bread being provided Leningrad was made almost entirely of "edible" cellulose, sawdust and flour sweepings. It did not support life. The death toll rose day by day. Leningrad required a minimum of 1,000 tons of supplies a day—not just food, but kerosene, gasoline, munitions.

Even if the Zaboroye highway worked at maximum efficiency, not more than 600 or 700 tons a day could be expected.

The recapture of Tikhvin changed all this.

"Without exaggeration," wrote Dmitri Pavlov, the food chief, with characteristic understatement, "the defeat of the German Fascist troops at Tikhvin and the recapture of the Northern Railroad line up to Mga station saved from starvation thousands of people."

This put back into operation the Tikhvin-Volkhov railroad, the connec-

tions to Novaya Ladoga and, by the end of December, the line to Voibokalo. By December 25 the perilous, difficult, agonizing haul from Zaboroye had been abandoned.²

Another help was the introduction on Lake Ladoga of the 1½-ton GAZ-AA truck and soon thereafter of the 3-ton Zis-5. These trucks could move across the ice at speeds of twenty, thirty and even forty miles an hour. They cut transit time to a little more than an hour, reducing exposure to Nazi gunfire and making two or three trips a day possible for hardy drivers.

Service facilities were built on the ice—first-aid stations, traffic-control points, repair depots, snow-clearing detachments, bridge-layers (to put wooden crossings over weak points or crevasses). Soon there were 19,000 persons enrolled in the ice-road effort.

Party Secretary Zhdanov and Kuznetsov personally inspected the ice road, seeking some means of improving turnover. They imposed delivery norms (2¼ tons a day for the GAZ-AA trucks), introduced a premium system, reorganized the direction of the supply system and were able to bring deliveries up to 700 tons by December 22 and to 800 tons by December 23.

This tiny improvement came very late. Death was stalking the Leningrad streets. The Party committee in the Central Kuibyshev District was struggling with a question which had no precedent—how to organize the trucking of bodies from the local hospital to the cemetery. Bodies were beginning to pile up in the courtyards by the hundred.

Party Secretary Kuznetsov had a bitter conversation one day with Major General P. A. Zaitsev at Smolny. Zaitsev was complaining that because of a lack of adequate support he had lost eight hundred men in three days' fighting. Kuznetsov gloomily observed: "Why do you think we are moving sappers out of the front lines? In order to dynamite mass graves in the cemeteries to bury civilians."

The December death toll was 53,000 persons, more or less—equal to that for the whole of 1940. The total was nearly five times that of the admittedly incomplete figure of 11,085 in November. Party members tottered into regional offices, put their cards on the desk and wandered off, mumbling, "Tomorrow I'll die. . . ."

One day Zhdanov called in General Mikhail Dukhanov. He had received a report of a dangerous outbreak of dysentery among youngsters in a boarding school. With typical Soviet bureaucratic suspicion he thought the school administration might be stealing food and depriving the children.

Dukhanov appeared at the school shortly after daybreak, hoping to catch the thieves at work. He watched the food checked out of the storehouse and into the kitchen, watched it cooked and examined the inventory. All was in order.

He stood by as the children ate breakfast—25 grams of bread and a mug

² In the opinion of Dmitri V. Pavlov the Zaboroye road played no substantial role in supplying Leningrad. (Personal communication, April 30, 1968.)

of hot water with salt. He went to the dormitory. Youngsters who were strong enough put on their heavy jackets and went to the street where they were tearing down a wooden house for firewood. The others lounged listlessly on their beds.

For lunch they had 50 grams of bread and a pat of butter, a little soup made of frozen beets and some cereal which seemed to be mostly linseed-oil cake. General Dukhanov noticed that many children put part of their soup and cereal into jars. He thought they were saving it to eat later on. But he was mistaken. Soon those who were able to walk appeared in heavy clothes. They were going home to visit their relatives. Most of them clutched a glass or jar in which they were carrying food for a starving mother, brother or sister. General Dukhanov wanted to halt the youngsters and speak to them. But he suddenly realized there was nothing to say. He went back that evening and reported to Zhdanov that there was no stealing, just lack of food.

He asked Zhdanov if he had been right not to stop the children as they were leaving the school.

Zhdanov spoke slowly: "I would have done the same thing."

Then he turned and took up the telephone: "This is Zhdanov speaking. Within forty minutes put down a heavy barrage on the Nazi regiments of Majors Gnidin and Witte. What for? In order to inflict heavy casualties on the Fascists. Report to me when you have carried out the instructions."

Zhdanov hung up and turned back to General Dukhanov. "Go home and rest. Thank you for the report. We will evacuate those children immediately."

It was about this time that a ski detachment of sailors from the battleship *Marat* was sent on a night scouting expedition across the ice to reconnoiter the German gun positions around the Peterhof Palace. They found that the grandiose sculpture of Samson by Mikhail Kozlovsky which dominated the great cascade leading down to the sea was missing—it had been disassembled and shipped off to Germany.

When the sailors reported their discovery, the *Marat* was ordered to lay down a special barrage on the positions around Peterhof—in reprisal for the theft.

On the night of December 23 Zhdanov sat down with Party Secretary Shtrykov, just back from Vologda, where he had been expediting movement of supplies.

"We'd like to increase the Leningrad ration from 125 grams," Zhdanov said. "Can you guarantee that the supplies will come in without interruption?"

It was a critical question. Shtrykov considered a few moments, then replied slowly and solemnly, "I can."

There was on hand in Leningrad at that moment a little more than two days' supply of flour. The ice road had brought in only 16,449 tons of food

since its start—an average of 361 tons a day. The next evening, the twenty-fourth, the Leningrad Military Council, at Zhdanov's initiative, ordered the first increase in the Leningrad ration—a miserable 100 grams (a slice of bread) for workers, and 75 grams for all others, including children.

It was, as Pavlov insisted twenty-five years later, a very daring and crucial act. There was no reserve in case of accident or interruption of the supply route. If something happened and the ration again had to be cut back, Pavlov could hardly bear to think of the dreadful consequences.

Zhdanov's act was a bold gamble. But he hoped that the deliveries by the ice road would continue to grow. And—although no Leningrad historian directly mentions the fact—the terrible toll of death within the city was already radically reducing the numbers of persons who had to be fed.

There was another reason for confidence on Zhdanov's part. He had just paid his first visit to Moscow since his return to Leningrad in the critical days of late June.

There had been a conference at the Kremlin—Stalin; Zhdanov; Marshal Boris M. Shaposhnikov, Chief of Staff; General Kirill Meretskov, commander of the newly created Volkhov front; General M. S. Khozin, commander of the Leningrad front; Lieutenant General G. G. Sokolov of the Twenty-sixth Army (soon transformed into the Second Shock Army); and Major General I. V. Galanin of the Fifty-ninth Army.

The conference was convened December 11 in the full flush of the recovery of Tikhvin, the recapture of Rostov and Marshal Zhukov's rapidly developing and successful offensive to drive the Nazis back from Moscow. Shaposhnikov described his plan for breaking the Leningrad blockade in which Meretskov with the Fourth, Fifty-second, Fifty-ninth and Twentieth (Second Shock) armies was to play the principal role. The Fifty-ninth and Second Shock armies were just being re-formed. Shaposhnikov said Meretskov's task was to drive the Germans from the territory east of the Volkhov River, to cross the river and smash the divisions on the western shores. Then Meretskov would drive northwest and in cooperation with the Leningrad front destroy the German siege forces.

Optimism was high. Shaposhnikov emphasized the crisis in Leningrad and pointed out that it would not permit waiting for the full concentration of troops before beginning action. Zhdanov and General Khozin stressed the heavy toll of air and artillery bombardment in Leningrad and the rapidly rising toll of hunger and cold. People were dying in such numbers that every effort must be made quickly to liquidate the blockade.

It was agreed that the Volkhov front should continue the attack already under way. The offensive would be a rolling one and continue without pause until Leningrad had been liberated and the grip of Army Group Nord broken. The participants, filled with confidence, flew north from Moscow. For the first time since his reverses of the summer Zhdanov must have felt that fate was turning his way. With a bit of luck and hard fighting by three

army groups—the Leningrad, the Volkhov and the Northwest—Leningrad should be freed. The city had suffered terribly, but a change seemed to lie just ahead.

The operative plans for the attack were transmitted to the Leningrad and Volkhov commanders on December 17. On the twentieth the offensive was to open. A very short term for preparation. But there was no time to waste, and Zhdanov and Meretskov did not wish to lose the momentum of the successful Tikhvin offensive.

It was under the influence of this heady prospect that Zhdanov took the risk of ordering the Christmas boost in the Leningrad ration.

Zhdanov's decision was communicated to Party workers on duty at Smolny at about 1 A.M. Christmas morning. It was the 116th day of the siege. The workers were asleep at their desks or catching a cat nap in the common dormitory in the cellar. They were routed out to spread the word to the various quarters of the city. The temperature was below zero, and wind swept snow through streets already piled high with drifts. The Party workers were in no better shape than their fellow citizens. "On my way to Vasilevsky Island," recalled N. M. Ribkovsky, a political instructor, "I had to stop and rest five times." Party representatives reached the bread stores before they opened at 6 A.M. and passed on news of the increase in ration. One party worker in the Vyborg region claimed that citizens queued up at the local bakery shouted "Hurrah!" An old railroad repairman named Petrov awakened his children. He reported that they cried when they heard they would be getting another morsel of bread.

The radio was not working on Christmas Day—because of the virtual absence of electric power. Only one power plant, the Red Oktyabr, was running. Perhaps for this reason, news of the increase in ration seems to have spread slowly through Leningrad. Many diaries of the period, even of such an energetic political optimist as Vsevolod Vishnevsky, fail to mention the event, or report it only a day or several days later.

On December 25 the musicologist Valerian Bogdanov-Berezovsky noted the ration increase in his diary. But he also mentioned more pressing matters. It was the end of the financial year and the funds of the Composers Union and Music Fund had been exhausted. "We are cut off from the Union of Composers and from the Central Music Fund," he wrote, "and don't even know to which city they have been evacuated (from Moscow). And they evidently don't know that there are composers and musicologists remaining in Leningrad or how many we are. I learned recently that the Committee for Artistic Affairs is in Tomsk and sent a telegram to its head, M. Khrapchenko, with a request that he establish connections with the Union and the Music Fund."

That day Bogdanov-Berezovsky visited a composer named Malkov on Plekhanov Street who lay ill in a little matchbox (but warm) room. He recorded the death of another composer, A. Budyakovsky, and added:

I am experiencing great difficulties in connection with the opening in the Astoria of a so-called *stationar*, or feeding and medical station. The Union in the first drawing got three places. I have received many urgent requests. I have been especially disturbed by the call of L. Portov, who said several times in a pleading voice: "Please arrange it for me. Do it now. If you don't, within a week it will be too late. I'll not live." And in spite of this I could promise him only second place, together with F. Rubtsov and A. Peisin who are terribly weak, but in even worse condition is A. Rabinovich, long ill with tuberculosis, V. Deshevov, almost unable to move, and I. Miklashevsky. It is so difficult to choose. . . .

Vera Inber learned of the ration increase from her friend and hospital worker, Yevfrosinya Ivanovna, who went to the bakery to pick up her ration. On Tolstoy Square Yevfrosinya met a man who she decided was either drunk or crazy. He was crying, laughing and hitting himself on the head. Only when she arrived at the bakery and learned of the increase in ration did Yevfrosinya realize that the man was in ecstasy over the news.

A meeting was held in the dining room of the Writers' House on the evening of December 26. The writers slowly made their way through the drifts, past the corpses which had now begun to appear almost everywhere.

Vera Ketlinskaya made a speech. Soviet troops had broken two of the three circles around the city—the Tikhvin circle and the Voibokalo circle. Only Mga remained. That would be broken by New Year's Day. The boost in the ration was just the first swallow of spring. Enormous quantities of supplies were being concentrated within sixty miles of Leningrad—50,000 tons of cereals and macaroni, 42,000 tons of flour, 300 tons of meat. And much, much more. All of this would flood into the city once Mga was taken.

The writers, sitting like gray ghosts around the empty table, applauded weakly. Hope there was for life.

Hope there was. Zhdanov possessed it. A mass of supplies actually was being hurried to the perimeter. Anastas A. Mikoyan had arranged to move under the most urgent priorities 50,000 tons of flour and 12,000 tons of other food to Vologda, Tikhvin and the key distribution points for the Ladoga ice road. The Railroad Commissariat had been enlisted. Mikoyan and Zhdanov knew that Leningrad had less than five days' supply of flour on hand. The trains pounded north through the night from Zaininsk, Rybinsk, Saratov. On the cars were scrawled in great letters "*Prodovolstviye dlya Leningrada*" ("Food for Leningrad"). The supplies poured into the ruined station and sidings of Tikhvin. They were loaded without cease upon trucks, which lumbered over the rutted roads north to Ladoga, out on the ice and on to the Leningrad shore.

The offensive of General I. I. Fedyuninsky, the drive of the Leningrad troops toward Tosno, was going so well that Zhdanov was confident that Mga would be liberated for the New Year's holiday.

To give the starving, freezing people hope, to help them to survive to the

New Year and the recapture of Mga, hundreds of meetings were held throughout the city—in the ice-festooned factories (hardly a plant was operating now—on December 19, 184 plants had been put on a one-, two- or three-day week); in the windowless government offices; in the apartment houses where burned small *burzhuiki*—makeshift stoves. The word was passed on to all: by January 1 Leningrad will be liberated; the circle will be broken; Mga will be retaken.

But Mga was not retaken. Even before New Year's Day it was suddenly plain to Zhdanov that his Christmas optimism had been ill-founded. The terrible truth was that the Soviet troops had neither the physical strength nor the munitions to dislodge the Nazis.

The Red Army men were weak and sick. A report as of January 10 showed 45 percent of the units of the Leningrad front and 63 percent of Fifty-fifth Army units under strength. There were 32 divisions on the front. Of these, 14 were only up to 30 percent of strength. Some infantry regiments were only at 17 to 21 percent of authorized manpower.

Nor was there any way to bolster their ranks. During the whole winter of 1941-42 the Leningrad front grew by only 25,000. From October 1 to May 1, 1942, about 17,000 or 18,000 men were sent to the front from rear and office assignments, 6,000 were obtained from construction units and 30,277 sailors were provided from the Baltic Fleet. Women were mobilized, largely for rear and ARP duties, but by June, 1942, there were 9,000 in the front lines. In the last three months of 1941 about 70,000 men were sent to the front by Leningrad—29,567 in October, 28,249 in November and 12,804 in December. In the ensuing six months Leningrad was able to mobilize 30,000 men for active Red Army duty, but only 8,000 of these were provided from December to March.

These replacements hardly matched the Red Army losses. From October, 1941, to April, 1942, 353,424 troops reported sick or wounded, an average of 50,000 a month or 1,700 a day. Half of these were ill, largely of dystrophy and other starvation ailments. More than 62,000 troops came down with dystrophy from November, 1941, to the end of spring. The number ill with scurvy reached 20,000 in April, 1942.³ Deaths due to starvation diseases were 12,416, nearly 20 percent of troops on sick call, in the winter of 1942.

Men were too weak to fight or work. Yuri Loman, commissar for a truck unit, recalled that he had seen four men trying to load a mutton carcass, weighing possibly forty pounds. They did not have the strength to lift it. A. P. Lebedeva, head of the factory committee at the Krasnaya Treugolnik rubber plant, was at her desk when a middle-aged, gaunt man tottered in. She recognized him as a cutter in the shop. "Give me a bowl of soup," he said. "If you'll do that, I'll be back at work tomorrow." Lebedeva had no

³ O. F. Suvenirov, in *Vtoraya Mirovaya Voyna*, Vol. II. Moscow, 1966, pp. 159-166. Dmitri V. Pavlov mistakenly asserts that "no scurvy occurred during the whole of the war among Red Army troops." (Pavlov, *op. cit.*, 3rd edition, p. 103.)

food, but she poured him a mug of hot water. The worker drank it at a gulp, not realizing it was water. "Thanks for the soup, Lebedeva," he said. "Now, I'll go into the shop and start working."

Zhdanov's gamble was not paying off. Leningrad, incredibly, had slipped closer to utter disaster. The Military Council met in emergency session December 29. The previous day the ice road had delivered only 622 tons of freight, of which 462.2 tons were food. This was about half the essential minimum. To the horror of Zhdanov, General Khozin, Kuznetsov and Pavlov, deliveries dropped to 602 tons on December 29, of which only 431.9 tons were food.

The road of life might, it seemed, become the road of death.

On January 1, the 123rd day of the siege, the critical tabulation, known only to Zhdanov, Kuznetsov, Khozin, Pavlov and three others, showed that Leningrad's cupboard was bare. There was in the reserves: 980 tons of flour, 3 tons of grain, 82 tons of soy flour, 334 tons of cereals and macaroni, 624 tons of meat and sausage, 24 tons of fish, 16 tons of butter, 187 tons of vegetable oil, 102 tons of fat and 337 tons of sugar.

That was flour for less than two days. Never had Leningrad been so close to starvation.

The days were beginning of which Kuznetsov later was to say: "There was a time when we gave bread to no one. Not because we did not want to give it out but because we had none."

It was in these days that Filipp Sapozhnikov, a hard-working, bad-luck truck driver on the Ladoga ice road returned to his barracks, late once more as he had been almost every day with his truckload of flour. He found a notice posted on the bulletin board:

"Driver Sapozhnikov: Yesterday, thanks to you, 5,000 Leningrad women and children got no bread ration."⁴

It was true. The margin was that thin. One late truck, and thousands of Leningraders waited in vain before the bread shop and scores died.

The ice road was not working. In fact, it was critically close to failure. So was the sleazy one-track Irinovskiy railroad which connected Ladoga with Leningrad. Under the impact of heavy traffic, lack of fuel, failing equipment, bad management, the weakness, illness and death of workers—from cold and starvation—shipments slowed and slowed again. By January 1 the branch was paralyzed. Not one train a day was getting through.

Director Kolpakov had started December with 57 of his 252 locomotives in service, of which 27 were switch engines. By the end of the month there were days when he had no more than 28 locomotives operating. He was getting only 92 hours' daily work from the engines—many of them were operating less than three hours a day. His staff was dissolving. From December, 1941, to February, 1942, he had 10,938 men and women on sick leave. Of these, 2,346 died, including 1,200 in January. The City Council

⁴ One calculation was that each large truck carried 16,000 rations (Kharitonov, *op. cit.*, p. 37).

ordered 5,000 persons to help keep the railroad going by clearing away the snowdrifts. Not more than 400 or 500 were strong enough to report for duty, and many were too weak to lift a shovel. The railroad had been attacked 356 times by Nazi bombers, and much of the signal equipment, switches, sidings and terminals was badly damaged or out of use.

There was no more coal, and the city water supply which serviced the boilers had frozen. Machinists with picks and crowbars pried coal dust out of the frozen soil. There was plenty of dirt mixed with the dust, but this "fuel" was used to fire up the boilers. The average haul per locomotive in December was nineteen miles.

Once more the fate of Leningrad was in balance. Once more Zhdanov took strong measures. The railroad director was removed on charges of confusion and failure to organize his work. Probably he was shot.⁵ Extra rations—125 grams of bread—were ordered for the railroad workers. The last few tons of coal in the city reserves were turned over. Woodcutting teams were sent to nearby forests to cut cordwood for the engines. Three top regional Party secretaries kept the pressure on. Even so, only 219 cars were loaded in January—a fraction of what was needed.

The great New Year's celebration which Zhdanov had promised Leningrad was not to be. True, some chauffeurs brought special gift parcels to Leningrad. Chauffeur Maksim Tverdokhlebov was making his third trip over Ladoga on the day before New Year's. His normal load was thirty barrels of flour.

There was a sign in the loading shed: "Comrade Drivers! If you carry 200 pounds of flour above plan, you will fulfill the bread ration for thousands of Leningraders."

Tverdokhlebov asked for his extra load. He was given a dozen wooden crates. He was surprised at their lightness. He thought they must be military supplies. Then he smelled a familiar but remarkable smell—tangerines! The cases were a gift from Georgia for the Leningrad children.

Zhdanov took desperate action. He put the Ladoga route under the iron command of Major General A. M. Shilov with I. V. Shikin, an experienced army political worker who had been prewar head of the big Gorky auto factory Party organization, as his chief aide. They were ordered to bring deliveries up to 1,200 tons a day and by any means necessary. Seven hundred Young Communists were sent to the ice road. Traffic control posts were established every 200 or 300 yards. Antiaircraft batteries guarded each kilometer of the route. The 7th Air Corps and the remaining fighters of the Baltic Fleet were assigned to ward off Nazi strafing planes. The short new Tikhvin-Volkhov-Voibokalo connection was put into use (at 5 A.M., January 1, 1942).

The temperature on the ice road ranged between 20 below zero and 40 below zero. The wind pressed endlessly from the north. The ice was

⁵ Kolpakov was publicly excoriated by Leningrad's Mayor, Peter Popkov, January 13, (A. Dymshits, *Podvig Leningrada*, Moscow, 1960, p. 288.)

so solid that KV-60 tanks now could be—and were—moved to Fedyuninsky's embattled army. But men froze to death in the cold, and trucks ground to a halt.

On January 5 Zhdanov addressed another appeal to the men of the ice road. He cast his message in fateful language. The road continues to work badly—very badly. It brings to Leningrad not more than one-third the freight needed for survival even on the scantiest level of existence.

"The supply of Leningrad and the front hangs by a thread," Zhdanov said. "The people and the troops are suffering unbelievable hardships.

"If the situation is quickly to be corrected, if the needs of Leningrad and the front are to be met, it all depends on you workers of the auto road—and on you only."

There was nothing more Zhdanov or the Party or the Leningrad Military Command could do. Now it depended upon the workers of the ice road.

Dulled, frozen, weak, often unable to keep to their feet, the people of Leningrad knew that survival hung in the balance. But they did not know by what a slender thread. They lived on hope, nourished by the December 25 ration increase, by the belief that Mga would be taken. They believed in the ice road, and it was at this time they first began to call it "the Road of Life."

Vera Inber was in a queue before a bakery one day. An old woman corrected a remark by her neighbor. "This is not black bread," the old woman said. "This is rye bread. It is Ladoga bread. It is the whitest of the white. It's holy bread, that's what." The old woman crossed herself and kissed the rough black loaf.

In her heatless flat Vera Inber fashioned the incident into a few lines for the poem with which she warmed herself in those arctic days, "Pulkovo Meridian." There were many in Leningrad who echoed the sentiment of the old woman. The bread was holy. They did not know that each coarse slice they ate might be their last.

"Never," wrote the authors of Leningrad's official history,

had Leningrad lived through such tragic days. . . . Rarely did smoke show in the factory chimneys. . . . The trams had halted and thousands of people made their way on foot through the deep drifts of the squares and the boulevards. . . . In the dark flats those who were not working warmed themselves for an hour or so before their *burzbuiki* and slept in their coats and scarfs, covered with their warmest things. . . .

In the evening the city sank into impenetrable darkness. Only the occasional flicker of fires and the red flash of exploding artillery shells lighted the gloom of the vast factories and apartment blocks. The great organism of the city was almost without life, and hunger more and more strongly made itself known.

Leningrad was dying.