

The morning sun coaxed a rising scent of ripe grain from the Latvian countryside, pouring gold on the workers cutting sheaves of rye to the rhythm of Misha's song. He could see them through the curtain of linden leaves cascading around the branch on which they had perched him to send his voice farther across the field. He watched their scythes flashing as they caught the light. And when the folk tune he sang came to an end, he immediately started another one. He was five years old, and he'd never felt so powerful.

His Aunt Lidia had admonished him not to make a nuisance of himself, but he couldn't help it if the workers liked his singing. "Come sing for us, Misha," they said. "You can help our work go faster." They'd all heard him singing around the grounds of the farmhouse his family was renting that summer. The rye harvest would take several days on this farm, unmechanized even though the year was 1929. Misha was proud that his singing could help it along.

The workers liked the quiet, unassuming boy whose sweet treble rang out with assurance over the field as they labored. But they couldn't know the magic unfolding in Misha's mind as he sang. Watching them swing their scythes, he could hear bits of other music in his head. Maybe a violin or a cello. Maybe a clarinet, like in songs he heard on the radio when Aunt Lidia turned it on in the kitchen. He could already pick out on the piano at home all the tunes he sang for the workers. It felt as though his imagination was connected to his ears.

Eventually, Aunt Lidia would send Misha's older brother, Nolya, to fetch him. And Nolya would always complain, as they walked home, how he'd rather be swimming.

Misha couldn't really explain it to anyone – not Aunt Lidia, certainly not Nolya. But he would think about it at odd moments of the day. The music would come back to him during lazy afternoons after a swim, or as he lay in bed on luminous summer evenings, waiting for sleep to come. He'd never let anything take it away from him.