

We lived in a maze of walls, barbed wire, fear, and cruelty.

And a landscape of screams.

Max Bloomberg's journal

PROLOGUE

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Daylight was fading on the late autumn day as Vasilevich made his way up from the subway and plodded the five blocks to his modest apartment in the Petrovka district.

The file clerk took the rattling elevator to the tenth floor, unlocked the heavy door, and began peeling off his coat. He momentarily wondered why there was no pleasant odor of *shchi*, his wife's delicious cabbage soup, when out of the corner of his eye he noticed a tall stranger holding a handgun.

He carefully raised his hands and turned to face the man, forcing himself to move slowly and keep his breathing even. It was probably just a robbery, not unusual with the soaring number of drug addicts in Moscow. He'd give the man what money he had, and probably be fine.

But the intruder was too well dressed, too clean to be an addict. He waved his weapon and placed a finger over his lips. "Put down your hands and sit." Passable Russian, but with a heavy German accent.

Vasilevich sank slowly into a large armchair in a corner.

“I’m not here to harm you,” the man said, “but don’t provoke me. You are Danislav Vasilevich, and you work for Rudolph Pikhoia?”

Vasilevich’s mouth became dry, and he had trouble forming the words. “Who are you? Where’s my wife? What do you want?”

The intruder waved his hand in a calming manner and spoke softly. “It’ll be better if you just listen and answer my questions. Then, perhaps, I’ll answer yours.”

Vasilevich took a deep breath to try to calm himself. Something strange and deep was going on here, but it left him with no choice but to obey. He lifted his chin. “Director Pikhoia is the chairman of the State Archival Service of the Russian Federation. While I work in the archives office, I’ve only met the director once. I’m just a clerk ... a clerk. You must need someone higher up.” Knots formed in his stomach, and a wave of nausea hit. “Please, where’s my wife?”

The stranger smiled. “Svetlana is a lovely young woman. Don’t worry. No harm will come to her. Not if you pay attention to what I want.”

The gunman knew her name. And his. And where he worked. What were they doing to her? Vasilevich stood and took a step toward the armed man. “If you harm her”

The intruder waved the automatic again and said in an almost-kindly manner, “Sit back down and listen. My needs are simple. We know you have access to many German documents from what you Russians still call the Great Patriotic War.” The man pulled out a small notebook. “They are kept in the ... Central State Special Archive, division 14B, room 2.” He returned the notebook to a pocket. “We need a small amount of information. If you obtain it without letting anyone know what you have done and deliver it to me, you’ll have enough rubles to enjoy a nice seaside vacation. With your wife.”

“My Sveta. You’ve not harmed her? Please don’t. She’s ... very sensitive.”
He heard a quiver in his voice but was beyond embarrassment.

“The Soviets captured a camp in the Czech Republic called Theresienstadt.”

“I mostly file old documents. I’m able to read some German, but I usually only read enough to get an idea of the contents, so the papers can be properly classified. Our great Soviet armies liberated a number of concentration camps. I can’t remember hearing that name before. Frankly, I’ve never paid much attention to what happened such a long time ago.”

“That’s not important. The Soviet NKVD grabbed many records from the camps, and we’ve discovered these documents are now in your Archives of the Russian Federation. We need you to find certain information and bring it to us. Quickly. You must start your search tomorrow.”

The Russian shook his head and was on the verge of tears. “Not easy. We need special permission to enter areas we aren’t assigned to.”

The German’s face registered no emotion. “I’m sure you can deal with that. I don’t want to spell out what will happen if you fail. Listen carefully now. No notes. Nothing ever in writing, except copies of the information I need. Back in 1945 an SS Colonel Steinhauser had a prisoner make a silver box while in Theresienstadt. I must know the name of that silversmith. It has to be in the archives here. My countrymen kept excellent records. I need any and all information about this prisoner. Everything. Understand?”

“But, what if—?”

The German speaker didn’t allow Vasilevich to finish. “Better you should not think of that.”

The man reached into his pocket and handed the Russian a cellular phone. “Tomorrow at this time, I’ll call you. Let the phone ring without answering. Then go at once to the Cafe Gallery. You know the place?”

“I know where it is. Not far from here.” He frowned and shook his head. “Never been there. Too expensive a restaurant for people like us.”

The intruder handed the young Russian a small stack of rubles. “Order a meal and start to eat. Sit near a window. While you’re eating, I’ll call you again. If you have the information, simply say ‘I’m busy.’ Otherwise, just say, ‘You have the wrong number.’ Better that you be busy. Understand?”

Still shaking and still sick to his stomach, Vasilevich simply nodded.

“I’ll give you instructions about delivery tomorrow. Remember, not a word to anyone if you want your lovely Sveta back home unharmed. Now sit on the floor and face away from the door.”

Unable to think of any other response, Vasilevich obeyed.

As the German opened the door, he murmured, “Remember, your wife’s life is in your hands. We have informers everywhere, so don’t do anything you’ll regret.”

And he was gone.

A few minutes later, just as he calmly exited the building, a shiny black Mercedes pulled up alongside. He jumped in before the car came to a full stop, and was whisked away.

“And so, Gerhard, did it work out?” the driver asked in German. “Can he do it?”

Gerhard nodded. “Your information on the archivist was correct. I think it’ll work.”

“Suppose he does obtain what we need to know about that Jew,” the driver went on, “how do we handle him and his woman, after we get it?”

“No question about Herr Vasilevich. He has to be erased. An accident. Can you arrange it?” His contact had better be able to, or of what use was he?

“Shouldn't be a problem. And the lady?”

“That depends. Did she see or hear anything? Has she been touched by your people? You know what I mean.”

“Absolutely not. She was blindfolded and kept isolated. Given food and water. No one has spoken to her, except a few whispers. We even made her wear earplugs. She has a little bell she can ring with her fingers if she needs to use the facilities.”

Gerhard's expression conveyed indifference. “In that case, no matter how this turns out, just take her somewhere, give her a few thousand rubles, and turn her loose. She's young and pretty. She can still have a life.”