

The Blood of Innocent Children

By Eugenia Budman

The bus stop was packed with the early morning crowd: plant workers with hungover faces, country women who spread their heavy legs over their burlap bags, and some low-level office workers and students in jackets too light for the day's rain. Alex's shoulders hurt, and his hands froze holding the bags with gifts. He was sorry he let his wife take his Toyota today, of all days.

When the bus arrived, a man standing behind Alex opened his arms and with the sound, "Ugh," pushed him toward the door. The tight crowd swirled and pulled one of his bags. Alex hastily caught the package just before being dragged into the far end of the bus. Perfume, sweat, late and early alcohol, and the earthy smell of the vegetables mixed into a moist cloud, making it hard to breathe, and he raised his head at every stop trying to catch some fresh air. At his exit, Alex nervously pushed through the crowd and dragged someone by the button, caught in the plastic handle of one of his bags, until the handle snapped.

"Shit!" he swore and used his chin and both elbows to keep it all together.

Once outside, Alex deeply inhaled cool, August air and headed to the Administration building. He knew he looked comical holding his many packages—well-worn backpacks, book bags, and briefcases seemed more appropriate on the university's grounds—but he could allow himself to look funny. Alex was the Associate Dean of the Physics Department. He had worked at the university for thirty years, received all his degrees and promotions there, and survived all the government and management crises. He had shaped this old school into one of the prominent Belarus Higher Education Schools.

Alex noticed his secretary, Francesca Konopel'ko, in his office window on the second floor. She looked at herself in her make-up mirror and ran her hand over her head, ensuring every hair was in place. Alex liked his secretaries to resemble American secretaries as they were portrayed in Russian movies—black suits with short skirts, high heels, and hair in perfect buns sitting low on their necks. Francesca was twenty-five years old, plump, and her real name was Tasja. There were no Francescas in the whole country of Belarus, especially in her village where people spoke bad Russian mixed with Belarusian and Polish and wore black resin boots most of the year, but the name stuck. Alex also liked his secretaries to be in tune with his needs.

He knew that his coffee was brewing and the sweet rolls Francesca baked for his return waited in the small microwave oven, time programmed on the display. She only had to press the red button to start the heating cycle.

With a sigh of relief, Alex dumped bags and packages on his desk. He gave Francesca a big smile and lightly patted her round bottom. Francesca playfully turned her shoulders, caught his interested look, and, satisfied, stretched her neck, trying to guess which package was hers.

“I got a sweater for you, from Macy’s.” Alex opened one of the boxes, untied the pink ribbons, carefully lifted thin, rustling paper, and held the sweater up to Francesca’s bust. She blushed and pressed purple wool to her body, stretching it on herself with both hands.

“Thank you, Alexander Ivanovich! Everyone is wearing these sweaters now. How did you guess my size?”

Alex raised his eyebrows, and she chuckled.

“Would you like your coffee now?”

“Coffee? Later. I need to take care of this.” Alex opened his arms wide and pointed with his chin to the table overflowing with packages.

He was happy to be back.

After a few hours of basking in exaggerated excitement over his gifts and his stories about America where he had spent three weeks visiting his old friend David, Alex came back. As he opened his door, he grimaced, as if someone had filled his office with a foul smell. The slim, brown folder, with the old-fashioned shoe laces tied in a neat bow, lay on his desk as it usually had every August, right before the start of the new school year. It lay separate from other papers on the lower corner of his table, at his right hand, ready to be opened. Not today, he thought with annoyance. Why couldn’t she be more sensitive? She can call herself Francesca, but she’s still a thick-skinned village girl. Before lunchtime he reviewed his papers and emails and pushed the folder farther away from himself. After lunch, he thought and winced again.

The university’s cafeteria was stuffy and noisy with buzzing voices and laughter, sounds of plastic chairs scratching the floor as students and staff sat down and got up, and the thunder of industrial-sized pots and pans from the kitchen.

Alex sat down for lunch with the professor of mathematics, Anna Petrovna Matveeva, or Anka, as he and David had called her since they were five years old. Alex could never define what it was about Anka that made men notice and remember her. David once said that it was

the rhythm of her moves, as if a half beat off from everyone else. Alex's heart sank every time she raised her blue eyes at him, and he anxiously searched for something intelligent to say, afraid to disappoint her. For him it was an old, smoldering romantic love which mixed very well with his many other loves.

"David sent a gift for you," said Alex. He put a black velvet box next to her plate, anticipating excitement, maybe a hug. He swayed closer to Anka.

"How is he?" she asked and put her hand over the box, as if warming it, not paying attention to his move.

Alex felt a pang of jealousy and sat back. "He is good. Ooo-kay, as they usually are in America."

"Tell me about him."

"He lives in a three-bedroom house. It is huge compared to our apartments. He has everything—cars, house, and stuff. He travels a lot, too—Europe, Asia, everywhere. You know, the conferences, and for pleasure."

"But he never came back here."

"Why would he? Not much has changed since he left."

"It never will," said Anka sadly.

"He asked about you." Alex tried to keep the conversation pleasant.

"Tell me about his family."

"His wife doesn't speak Russian but understands a little. They have two boys, adults now, who live on their own. His parents are still alive, remember them?"

Anka grew silent.

"It's been thirty years since he left," Alex said softly.

After a long pause, while Alex chewed his sausage and Anka watched the rain smearing dirt on the window, she said, "Do you remember why he left?" She was starting again that old, unpleasant-for-both-of-them conversation.

"All of them were leaving then. He left, too." Alex remembered the brown folder and his shoulders tensed. He cracked his neck to relieve the pressure. The brown folder was the reason David left Belarus and Anka, he knew that.

"Remember the meeting where you excluded him from the Young Communist League and expelled him from the university?"

She wouldn't drop that depressing topic.

“I did what I had to do, and David understood it. We laughed about it just two days ago. It was only a formality then. He was leaving the country anyway. Why would he want to remain in the League, or in the university?” Alex answered.

Anka still stared at the dirty window.

“You know, some of them had to go through real shit when they decided to leave,” Alex continued, massaging the back of his neck. “I made it easy for him—he just had to show up, and nobody said anything derogatory to him. Nobody said he was a traitor. It was nothing. Just a little bump on the way to glorious America.”

“America...” echoed Anka, and then said, “I saw his face when he walked out of that meeting. He looked at me as if I was the one expelling him. All of us were expelling him, Sashok.”

Alex chuckled—no one called him by this childhood nickname anymore. He was Alexander Ivanovich, or Alex, an Americanized version of Alexander. They knew him the longest, David and Anka; the three of them grew up in one communal apartment, sharing a bathroom and a kitchen.

“I did all I could to soften the blow,” he repeated. “He understood and remained my friend. We had such a good time in Denver.”

“But he would not come here.” Her slim finger touched the corner of her eye and moved down her cheek.

Alex put his hand over her fingers, still warming the box, and got up. He needed a quick meeting with Francesca to calm him down before he looked at this year’s brown folder.

Sashok didn’t have a father. Ivan Syabrov was the name of his Ded (the grandfather), who gave the boy his last name and his patronymic name. Sashok saw his mother only once in his life. When he was five, a plump, brightly dressed woman crouched before him. She had so many shiny accessories—a big brooch, gold buttons, earrings, and bracelets—that Sashok didn’t look at her face, reaching for the shiny objects instead. She hugged him, tickled and kissed him, and he screwed up his nose, breathing in a strong alcohol smell mixed with sweat. He didn’t know who she was, but Ded explained disapprovingly, “Your mother.”

“You understand, baby? You understand?” the shiny woman kept asking as she rocked Sashok’s wooden horse. She needed that rocking movement to hide the fact that she was drunk

and couldn't stand straight. "I wanted to see you. I'll come back soon... You understand, baby?"

"Lost cause," said Ded after she left, and hit the table with a half-finished bottle of muddy liquid. He drank every Friday and through the weekend.

Like everyone else in their communal apartment, Sashok was afraid of his Ded. He was a big man with thick shoulders and wide hips, and he enjoyed fights that often erupted in their courtyard among the drunks. During these fights he stood firm, no matter how much alcohol he had, his bow legs apart and his arms turning like helicopter's blades, shattering faces and bodies, stirring up his rage with shouts. "Traitors! Damn Zhydy (kikes)! Soon, just wait, we'll kick all of you out!"

Sashok saw David's parents hiding their eyes and turning away, as if ashamed of something they shouldn't have done, and David's hurt face as he buried his head into his father's shoulder.

"Don't you play with this boy," warned Ded. "One day he'll turn on you."

But Sashok liked David. They were the same age, went to the same school, and did their homework together in the kitchen, competing and helping each other. Anka was there, too, but Ded didn't care about her.

Ded scared Sashok with stories about innocent Russian children found in ditches and forests with their blood drained out. He said that "zhydy" kidnapped and killed Christian children to use their blood for their bread, the Passover matzo. It was proven by militia that Jews did it – the dead little children were circumcised as a part of the ritual.

Sashok didn't know much about religion; Ded was a communist, and they never went to the church. But this story bothered him. He couldn't sleep for many nights, imagining himself in the hands of scary men with long knives, looking like ugly witches from a fairy tale. Sashok tried to figure out what "circumcised" meant and decided that it was some special torture for poor Christian children. He couldn't imagine David's father, a round balding man with tender pink skin and plump soft hands, to be a murderer of small children. Or David's mother, a frail, frightened woman with big, soft eyes just like David's, who tiptoed down the corridor when she needed to use the communal kitchen or bathroom, perpetually afraid of drunken Ded.

Sashok didn't know what to think.

One evening, when the light in the communal kitchen was down because of a late winter thunderstorm, and there was nothing else to do but tell scary stories, Sashok decided to ask.

"David, do you know how your matzo is made?" he asked.

David raised his shoulders and spread his arms wide apart in surprise. He was tall and thin, and his arms stuck out of his shirt like scarecrow sticks.

“Did you know that the blood of innocent Christian children was used to make your matzo?” Sashok continued to drill him. “My Ded said that.”

The candlelight threw moving shadows on their faces, changing their expressions into strange grimaces.

“Yeah? Who’s Christian?” Anka ignored the scary part, but the new word got her attention. Her eyes opened wide, reflecting two dancing flames. Her mouth opened, too, showing a still-healing gum in the gap between her bottom teeth. Anka was waiting for an explanation.

“You and I are Christians,” said Sashok with confidence. “David is zhyd.”

“A Jew,” corrected David, already familiar with the word.

They sat for a while, making shadow puppets, and then David offered, “Hey, I know what to do. Let’s go and see if it is true. The Passover is coming up, my dad said, and we will order matzo. We can follow the man who takes the order and find out how it’s made.”

“Let’s!” said Sashok.

“I’ll come, too,” said Anka, jumping on her chair in anticipation of adventure.

Sashok saw him first—a very short and skinny man who came every year at the end of the winter to visit a couple of Jewish families in their apartment building. He could have been mistaken for a child from behind, if it wasn’t for his long black coat and thick-soled boots. David’s mother looked around, ensuring that Ded was asleep. Her eyes asked the kids not to make a sound. She hurriedly led the man into her room and closed the door.

They waited in the kitchen while the man finished his visit. He walked out with his hands deep in his pockets and headed across the courtyard to the noisy street.

Sashok followed the man a few steps behind. Like a spy from a movie, he ran from tree to tree, jumped in doorways, and stood close to strangers, pretending he belonged to their families when the man turned his head. Anka and David repeated each step. The short man took a bus, then a tram to the last stop, and started down the narrow street covered with crusty ice mixed with mud. Sashok walked first, synchronizing his steps with the man’s, hoping the man wouldn’t notice the chomping sounds of small boots behind him. David and Anka waited for his nod, signifying that the road was clear, and then followed, tightly holding each other’s hands.

It was getting dark and cold. February rain turned into thick snow. Anka’s short boots

turned black, covered with mud and full of water;. Sashok felt the cold, even deep inside his stomach. At the very end of the street, the man stopped for a minute, looked around, and ran into the one-story wooden house behind the crooked fence. The fence was broken in many places, and the kids clung to the windows.

Sashok saw a long table illuminated by a light bulb hanging low on a frayed wire. An intense white circle of light gradually transitioned into yellow, then gray, leaving the corners of the room dark. A familiar Russian oven, exactly as they drew them in the picture books, shiny and white, with a black rounded mouth in the middle, took up almost half of the room. Gray bags tied with thick linen ropes stood near the table on a tarpaulin sheet. There was a deep wooden barrel in the far corner. It was filled with black liquid. Anka gestured to the barrel. Sashok and David nodded and pasted their faces closer to the window.

Four old women stood around the table. They were dressed in washed-out cotton robes and aprons; light scarves tied in the back covered their hair. It was hot in the room—the windows were fogged at the corners and long streaks of water drew unsteady lines. The women's faces were flushed, and they occasionally raised their elbows to wipe away sweat. Two of them mixed the dough, adding flour and water from the transparent milk bottles, their arms and bodies moving quickly, as if time was of the essence. A third woman spread the dough into thin squares in the flat baking sheet, and then ran a metal rolling pin with small sharp needles over it. The fourth woman checked the old clock on the wall, and, with a long-handed oven fork, pulled out the sheet with baked matzo. A thin man, looking even smaller without his coat, examined every white square with brown specs, and either nodded or shook his head, and matzo went either on the table to cool off, or into a box under the table. The same woman then took another baking tray with carefully laid out thin dough, and, with the oven fork, moved it into the oven mouth, noting the time. There were two knives covered with dough on the table.

Sashok waited for about forty minutes and saw two cycles of matzo making, always the same, when Anka suddenly kicked him in his side.

“Look!” she whispered.

Sashok saw a girl about their age with wiry carrot curls flying out of her shawl. She walked toward the barrel, holding a bent zinc pitcher. The surface of black liquid rippled and distorted the dimly reflected light bulb in response to her quick steps. Sashok clutched the icy windowsill.

The girl lowered a corner of the pitcher into the liquid, and when it was full, brought it to

the brightly lit table. She poured the liquid into the milk bottles.

It was clear water.

Sashok let go of the windowsill. Anka and David moved away, into the crusty mud. Under a dim light from the window, Sashok saw Anka's face change from tense and serious to a silly clown's grin. Then a short "he" reached his ears. Then a loud laughter shook the quiet street. Sashok didn't wait long to join. The kids leaned against each other, bent over with roaring laughter, not afraid to be discovered on this dark street far from home...

On the way back, Sashok felt someone's cold bony hand in his pocket, tightly wrapping his fingers, either looking for warmth or a friendly shake.

I will never let anyone hurt David, promised Sashok, tightening his grip.

Somebody else's small hand crawled into his other pocket, holding onto his index finger like babies do.

I will always love Anka, he said to himself.

Francesca left early, and Alex was not able to relax. Frayed laces of the cursed folder moved from the draft, inviting him to open it. Alex reluctantly pulled the strings. He reached for the red felt pen and lifted the first page to his eyes. Stubborn, thought Alex tiredly.

It was the list with twenty names. Twenty Jewish kids—"hidden" Jews documented as Russians, half-Jews, and just Jews—loved Physics and hoped to get in. This year's quota was very small, much smaller than the last, and it was Alex's job to admit only a few and flunk the rest.

"Horowitz David, 18 years old. David..." He closed his eyes listening to the full-blown headache. "Passed exams with... all A's. And a first place... He did some research already in... Oh, and his family is... No bribe... We can say he didn't pass." With his red pen, Alex crossed David Horowitz's name from the list. His pen caught on a speck of dust, and a bright red drop spread over the last letter.

The blood of innocent children... Ded's words popped into his mind.

Alex cringed and continued. He would finish the damn folder today, and until next August he wouldn't have to see it again.