

BREAKING BREAD WITH A KGB MAJOR IN A PUBLIC EATERY

by

Lazarus Trubman

I was the lonely diner in this tiny restaurant on the eastside of Chisinau, and the only thing that irritated me was the mirror in a gilt frame behind the bottles. Every time I looked up, I saw myself looking like a portrait of one of my own ancestors: Lazarus Trubman, deep in thought, in a gilt frame. I had circles under my eyes and a couple of scars on my face; apart from that, I actually looked quite alright for a man who survived four years as a political prisoner in Northern Russia.

“What would you like?” asked the barman.

“A cognac,” I said. “How’s your fish today?”

“Was caught this morning.”

“I’d like it deep-fried with some new potatoes, please.”

The barman conveyed my order to the cook in the kitchen, uncorked a bottle of cognac and, filling the bottom of my glass, said: “I haven’t seen you in a very long time, teacher.”

“Almost five years,” I said. “And I really shouldn’t be here.”

“We went through some horrors too,” he said, rinsing the glasses. “My son in particular, but it wasn’t as bad as being in the Soviet prison though....”

I nodded, sipped my cognac, and listened to his story.

“Sorry to hear what happened to your son,” I said, when he finally fell silent.

“He’s alive, thank God, but will probably use a cane for the rest of his life.”

“Alive is what counts.”

“Here’s to those who are not,” said the barman, splashing some cognac for himself.

He was a man of forty, tall and a bit round-shouldered, with a pair of sunken sad eyes. A tattoo of an anchor on his left arm told me that he was in the Navy. His son tried to set military barracks on fire, was caught, tortured, but let go.

“Yes,” he said again, “that’s how it was when you were away.”

My glass was empty.

“Another one, teacher?” he asked.

“I’ll wait for my fish,” I said.

“Then a cigarette,” he said, pulling one out of the packet and clicking his lighter.

While I smoked, he dried the glasses. I was about to leave my country. A friend of mine who agreed to keep my personal library, 300 tomes of Russian and European classics, until I saved enough money in America to pay for the shipment, chose this restaurant as a meeting place, and he was late.

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Now my fish arrived.

“Here’s to you, teacher,” proposed the barman. “And all the others who paid for our freedom.”

We touched glasses, and he left me alone to eat in silence.

The fish was excellent, but I didn’t enjoy it: my mind was elsewhere.

The barman noticed that.

“This is the best deep-fried fish in town....”

“It’s not the fish, Kostake,” I interrupted. “It’s me.” His name appeared in my memory suddenly, and I was really glad it did.

“You remember!” He exclaimed, and a wide smile lit up his face.

“But of course, my friend: sooner or later everything comes back.”

“Would you like some coffee?” asked Kostake. “I’m about to start a fresh pot.”

“I’ll have it outside,” I said. “I’m waiting for someone.”

I left fifty rubles on the counter, went outside and occupied a small table next to the lilac bushes. The rain had stopped, and there were small puddles everywhere, and a light breeze from the south. I checked the time: three o’clock on the dot.

“Your coffee, teacher!”

“Thank you, Kostake,” I said inhaling the smell of freshly brewed coffee. “Why don’t you join me? It’s beautiful after the rain.”

“I’d love to, but I must go,” he said, pointing at the approaching couple.

I watched him holding the front door open for his customers and was about to try my coffee when someone’s light hand touched my shoulder:

“What are you up to these days, Lazarus, what are you up to?”

I turned around to see the man.

I really hadn’t recognized Professor Oliescu when he suddenly stood there in front of me. It wasn’t his voice, but his face; it wasn’t pale—it was utterly different! All I knew was that I knew this face. He said, noticing my confusion,

“Yes, yes, they can do this to you—they and their newly invented mill-stones! But your camp wasn’t a vacation either, right?”

I kept looking at his face. In reality, it was no longer a face, but two cheek-bones with thin skin over them, and the muscles that formed an expression that reminded me of Professor Oliescu were so weak that they couldn’t hold his laugh for long. That’s why it was short and much too large; it distorted his face; it seemed huge in relation to his eyes, which were set far back.

“Professor!” I exclaimed and had to stop short not to add: I was told that you were dead! Instead: “Well, how the hell are you?”

“I’m great, Lazarus!” He put up a short laugh. “It’s spring in Chisinau!”

I tried to make out why he was laughing. I knew him as a serious man, as Professor of Electromagnetics at Chisinau State University, but every time he opened his mouth it looked as though he were laughing.

“I’m better now,” he said. “Those mill-stones roughed me up quite a bit, but I got lucky.”

He paused, and I had a chance to take another close look at him. Actually, he wasn’t laughing at all, any more than two cheek-bones with

thin skin over them is laughing; it just looked like it, and I apologized for not recognizing him at first.

“I’ve gotten used to that,” he admitted.

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling embarrassed. I wanted to leave now, but he began coughing suddenly and couldn’t stop, and when he finally did, I saw two bloody spots percolating through his handkerchief.

“Scary, isn’t it?” he said. “But not as scary as a few other things I’m hiding under my clothes.”

“We all have our scars to hide, some deeper than others.”

“Don’t we, Lazarus? Scars of the century, aren’t they?”

His skin was like leather or clay, which could crack at any moment, and he had a belly that looked like a small party balloon held up by his thin ribs. His eyes hadn’t changed since I last saw him, lovely, but sunken.

I glanced at my wristwatch.

“Why are you suddenly in such a hurry, my friend?” he asked with his short deceiving laugh. “How about a drink?”

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He was a colleague of mine back in the old days at the university. I looked up to him and respected him more than any other professor in the country, but I really had no time for a drink: I was concerned that my friend had not arrived at the restaurant.

“My dear professor,” I said, because he was holding me by my arm. “I do have to go: a few important things must be arranged urgently.”

“Then some other time, right?” he said, and I knew for sure that this man was really already dead.

“Yes, I’d like that,” I said, finishing my coffee.

Maybe it was a laugh, I thought, while checking the street for a taxi. Maybe he kept laughing all the time because he was still alive, standing in front of me in downtown Chisinau, despite the rumors that he had cancer of the stomach and died in the camp.

As luck would have it, a taxi stopped next to us. I occupied the back seat, lowered the window and said: “It was really nice to see you alive and laughing....”

“We shall meet again, Lazarus,” he interrupted. “I have a lot to tell you, and I hope you’re still a good listener.”

“I’m always up for a good story, Professor,” I said. “Always up for a good story.”

I tried to distinguish the color of his eyes and couldn’t.

“In the meantime, call me,” he said, stepping back from the taxi. “It is allowed now.”

I promised and gave the driver my friend’s address.

“It’s quite a ride,” said the driver, moving into the traffic.

“Can you make it in thirty minutes?”

“I can certainly try.”

“You’ll be rewarded,” I said. I closed my eyes, and went back to the very beginning....

My wife always thought that someday I’d be a big success. I taught Russian Literature and Linguistics at Alecu Russo State University of Beltsy, a mid-size city located in the northern part of Moldavia, within the historical region of Bessarabia with which the city’s own history is closely intertwined. Then came the Seventies, Brezhnev’s time, deadly like a marsh, when everybody had to make a choice, and mine wasn’t the wisest one. Despite my reputation as a recluse, I still held regular gatherings in my apartment to entertain close friends and colleagues. The guests enjoyed slow dancing and drinks and didn’t notice that I was not talking much. They still had a good time. Only my wife seemed unhappy. “You used to be witty and cheerful, my love,” she said once. “Now you don’t say a word, as though you’re afraid of your plain language.” I didn’t deny it. Of course, I could make an effort to be smart and funny; it’s just I had the feeling I had said it all before and the things I really wanted to discuss were dangerous and forbidden.

I was in my late twenties then, healthy and still ambitious. I met plenty of people every day, killers and those who ordered the killings: you couldn’t tell by looking at them! All sorts of things happened around me, colleagues taken away in the middle of a lecture, close friends

disappearing, but as soon as I stepped onto the porch of my apartment, I didn't feel like talking about it.

More than once I thanked God for television.

In 1980 I began conducting underground seminars and attending gatherings organized, incidentally, by a couple of Jewish professors, where we discussed forbidden poetry and prose, as well as the latest news channeled from Great Britain, America and Israel. In the fall of 1981, I flew to Moscow and met with a few of my colleagues from the state university. The meeting took place in a dacha near the Russia's capital. We talked about dead friends and those who will die in the nearest future, a new distribution strategy, as well as about the need of a printing shop somewhere in Moldavia or Ukraine, preferably in Moldavia. That was dangerous, could've cost me more than professorship or advancement opportunities, but everything went fine.

30 When a month after my return I was invited by the local KGB office for a chat, it was a shock: KGB? I didn't know what to think, but this wasn't an institution I could ignore. In the lobby I was met by a young lieutenant, who escorted me to a Spartan room, two chairs and a desk, and left, wishing me a nice chat. The wait wasn't long. The operative who soon walked in greeted me with a smile, occupied a chair across the table, and introduced himself as Major Anatoly Orlov. He turned out to be a well-spoken, educated man of thirty, polite and a good listener. His smile disarmed me. He knew a lot about my work, personal life, hobbies, and talked about it casually. Then he suggested lunch at the nearby café, and I told myself that to break bread with a KGB Major in a public eatery didn't seem like a wise idea, but I couldn't refuse. After all, lunch was lunch, a harmless thing. I ordered a beef-stroganoff, and for the next forty minutes there was just a casual chat about nothing. Then we shook hands. Sunny day, everybody in white shirts.

Anatoly called again a week later to request another meeting, this time outside of his chatting room.

“A park perhaps?” I suggested. “There is one right next to the university....”

“I have a better idea: the residential complex on Garden Street, right behind the bookstore, apartment 603, at ten o’clock next Tuesday.”

“Next Tuesday?” I asked. “I need to check my schedule....”

“I’ve taken the liberty: your first class doesn’t start until 11:45 a.m.”

“It won’t be about my hobbies, I reckon?”

“Not anymore, my friend: it’ll be much more productive actually.”

We chatted for another few minutes; then the line went dead. I stood motionless in the hallway, unsure suddenly of how to live my life, how to go back into the living-room and entertain my family as if nothing happened....

It was a nine-story apartment complex behind the very popular bookstore; it had two elevators, but I took the stairs, as though afraid of meeting a familiar face. My hands were sweaty; I wiped them with a handkerchief. I reached the sixth floor and paused, remembering suddenly Anatoly’s remark before he disconnected the line. “The mill-stones of history never stop,” he said. “That’s why it is very important not to get between them. In your case, though, it’s a bit too late, my friend: your hands were already caught when I got you.” And I understood: that’s all they needed, a hand, even a finger, then it was only a matter of time to get my body and mind squeezed between the mill-stones to transform me into a flat, blind, obedient human being. Just one fucking finger!

I pushed the red button.

“Come in, it’s open!” Anatoly invited from the living-room.

I went.

He stood next to wall-to-wall bookshelves with an unlit cigar in his hand, and smiling softly, said:

“Please, have a seat, Lazarus.”

We were about the same age, Anatoly just a few months older, with a typical – milky-buttery – Russian face. A graduate from Leningrad State

University, where he studied literature and Russian language, he was recruited by the KGB as soon as he completed his first two years of education. He possessed a practical mind, a good memory, and loved to talk about modern poetry and prose as long as the conversation didn't veer toward forbidden themes.

"A cigar?" he offered.

"I actually quit," I said hurriedly. "About a year ago...."

"I'll take it as a no, but don't ever lie to me again!" he interrupted, in a slightly raised tone of voice. He pulled a tape-recorder out of his chest pocket, and for the next half an hour I listened to my own secret seminars and the discussions I had with my colleagues at that dacha near Moscow. Then he turned the recorder off and said, as if nothing happened:

"The purpose of today's meeting is to offer you a job, to point out the advantages and explain the privileges...."

"Simply say: you're offering me to betray my own people?"

32 "You're not betraying anybody," he said placing his cigar back in the box. "Not necessarily; at least for now, you're a Soviet citizen, aren't you? To defend the interests of your country was never considered a betrayal. I'm not asking you to kill people...."

"Don't see any difference!"

"....to poison them, to knock out their teeth. If it makes you feel better, you will never know what happened to them, how they were punished or if they were punished at all. As far as I see it, you'll be a ghost, Lazarus, an invisible man. Our organization is searching for people of certain qualities, and you possess those qualities. We're also very interested in a circle of your friends, Jewish in particular, with whom you have established a lasting relationship. The information about their plans, thoughts, and the contents of letters that are constantly channeled to them from United States and Israel, are just a few examples of what can be us...."

"So, it's a risk-free job, is it?"

"Nothing is completely risk-free, Professor!"

“I’m actually a college lecturer....”

“Not for long.... Any interest in advantages and privileges?”

“Not today, no.”

“Finish your tea, Lazarus!”

“Do I have a choice?”

“To avoid punishment? Not really, but that would be something to talk about in details at our next meeting on Monday. For now, I just want to remind you that everything I’ve said is strictly confidential and not for public discussion.”

“My family?”

“It’s for your own good, believe me.”

It still seemed like a game, sounded like one. I sat on the other side of the table and looked straight into Anatoly’s eyes, trying to understand why a young man of his abilities would dedicate his one and only life to a system that was hated by every civilized country. Was it the money or the power to manipulate people’s lives? Or both?

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He read my mind. “Don’t judge me and don’t try to understand me. I’ve chosen this life and I’ll never regret it. I can do a few things for you if you decide to consider our offer. If not...well, let’s just say that your life and the lives of your close ones will change forever...and not for the better.”

I kept silent.

“Until next Monday, then?” he said, extending his hand.

I kept silent.

“Is it Monday or Tuesday?” he asked.

“It’s Monday,” I said.

“Very good.”

We shook hands.

Out of the building, I went to the nearby park and played a couple of timed chess games before my first class of the week....

Monday I awoke early and took a long shower. A door slammed, then another: my wife and kids were gone, so it was 7:45 a.m. I had a little

over two hours to make a decision, hopefully the right one. I shaved, combed my hair, breakfasted. At 8:45 a.m. I was ready. I stood in front of a mirror trying to find any doubts in my tired blue eyes and couldn't. It was my opportunity, I told myself, to make something out of my miserable life. Anatoly was right: if not me, then someone else, younger, more decisive, and braver.

Survival was the name of the game.

I finally left the apartment.

Cloudy sky as usual, freshness in the air, magic of chlorophyll.

I went on foot and soon was at the bookstore. Once inside, I asked for a telephone.

"Please be quick," warned the young freckled clerk.

"I will," I assured her, and dialed the number.

"I'm listening," Anatoly appeared on the line.

"It's me," I said. "I'm not coming."

"It's very understandable."

"Hopefully, we'll have another lunch someday," I said: I didn't know how to end this conversation. "It'll be on me then...."

"I doubt it," Anatoly interrupted, and the line went dead.

I thanked the freckled clerk and left the bookstore. A huge cloud above the nearby park finally gave birth to a light cool rain. I inhaled deeply and began walking down the boulevard, an unknown creature in a gray raincoat whose life had just changed forever....

A month passed. On Friday, as soon as we finished watching the late-night movie, my wife was ready to go to bed, and I promised to join her after a quick cigarette.

"Are you all right, honey?" she asked.

"As all right as I can be."

"I can change that for the better in a heartbeat," she said touching my arm.

"I know," I said. "How about a rain-check?"

"A rain-check it is.... Don't take too many though."

On the balcony, with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of Feteasca Neagra in the other, I tried to understand why I felt restless all of a sudden. It wasn't the movie and it wasn't the food. What then? I glanced at my wristwatch: almost midnight. A black "Volga" attracted my attention because it appeared suddenly and stopped under a streetlight. Three tall men in shiny leather raincoats got out and walked briskly to the entrance of my apartment building.

I finished my wine and put out the cigarette. A few minutes later I heard the impatient ringing of the doorbell, followed by loud knocks.

They came for me....

"We're here!" The taxi driver brought me back to earth. "Twenty-three minutes exactly."

"You've earned the reward," I said. "What's the charge?"

"Seventeen rubles and sixty kopeks."

"Here's thirty rubles, my friend, and don't ask me why," I said. I got out of the car and began walking to my friend's house, the driver staring after me distrustfully.