

EUGENE DUBNOV

So to Speak¹

POLAND HAD PASSED OUT anyway, so to speak, and as we Russian historians say, it should have been bloody well grateful for being partitioned.

At seven o'clock I woke up; at twelve o'clock I drank some tea with jam.

A talk on the international situation will be given by Comrade Warden Comrade Polukhina Valentina Petrovna.

And I will tell you this: that if a bull were to come trotting along and started pissing—that he would have pissed straighter than you have dug these trenches here, although he would have been pissing while at the same time busy walking!

Shit, shit must be cleaned—and it doesn't want to be cleaned: heaps of it pile up and aren't flushed away—and I will take you to the room where those students live and show you what sort of people they are.

Steal? I simply couldn't bring myself to do such a thing, wild horses wouldn't make me do it, I've always been brought up not to steal—I might stoop so low as to ask for something: these potatoes you insist are yours, I assure you they're mine, all bags of potatoes look alike, and if your name's on it, that's neither here nor there.

And you, comrade H.G.Wells, come to visit us again in ten years' time, and then we'll screw your frigging head right off your frigging shoulders.

¹ Translated from Russian by the author and John Heath-Stubbs.

Trotsky? Are you by any chance the son of *Leon Trotsky*? No, not at all, it's even pronounced differently.

And so they voted posthumously.

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In 1912 a great peasant revolt took place in the Ryazan province. All the barns were burnt down, and the crops were set on fire. The local landowner locked himself and his family up in their manor house. Having laid waste the whole district, a huge mob of peasants, brandishing pitchforks and scythes, surrounded the house. The landowner, in an attempt to save at least his family, went out onto the terrace. "My dear little peasants," he pleaded, "what's the matter?"

The leader stepped out from the crowd and started to scratch his head. "What's the matter, what's the matter Nothing at all—that's what's the matter!"

And then they all went home.

A group of Polish prisoners was brought to a labour camp. They could not fulfill their production norms, owing to weakness and hunger. The colonel in charge of the camp summoned them. Poking his finger at one of the men in the front row, he said: "You, you there, why don't you fulfill the production norms?"

"It's hard," the prisoner replied, "the norms are high."

"Hard?" the colonel asked. "The norms are high? Well, never mind, you'll soon get used to them."

"I ... I won't be able to get used to them," replied the Pole.

"Won't be able to?" The colonel was genuinely surprised. "So you'll just have to kick the bucket."

Oranges were on sale on May Day 1967. A long queue built up on Lenin Avenue where a stall had been erected. Mother took me along with her so that we could get two kilos (we could have got even three, but my little sister was at the May Day Parade). I was warned in advance not to talk to Mother while queuing, as only one kilogram was allowed to each family. But after three hours in the queue, when we were already quite close to the stall,

I somehow forgot myself and not only started talking to her but even addressed her as "Mother."

"Ohhhhh!" the queue roared in fury. "So you've brought along all your little relations, have you? Your whole family, have you? So you want to have two kilograms in one house?!"

And we were thrown out of the queue in disgrace.

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"Under the wise guidance of comrade Stalin!" The Party Secretary concluded the factory meeting which was devoted to the case of the doctors accused of attempting to poison Soviet leaders.

Everyone leapt to their feet and began to applaud—and I of course with the rest of them. Well, this applause goes on for one minute, then two, then five, then ten, then fifteen, people's hands are sore, some find it difficult to keep on standing after two working shifts, but everyone is afraid to be the first to stop clapping. So we go on for another five, and then another ten minutes. The old foreman next to me seems to be falling asleep standing up, his applause becomes slower and slower—any moment now it will cease altogether. I watch him, hoping that will be soon and then I will be able to stop too. But it was not to be: having nearly stopped, he rallied himself and started all over again with renewed enthusiasm. I look at my watch: we've been clapping for nearly an hour. Some people seem to be close to fainting, but that pig of a party secretary on the platform doesn't even think of stopping, although his smile becomes more and more contorted—no doubt even he who's used to it finds this continual clapping painful too!

The first to stop—would you believe it—turned out to be me. And not because I couldn't go on—in principle I could have done so for another few minutes, to see if somebody else was going to give up before me—but it was simply that the whole thing was clearly becoming absurd.

Noticing that I had stopped, the old foreman stopped too and began wiping the swollen palms of his hands on his overalls. The applause began gradually to die down, first close around the two of us and then everywhere.

The Party Secretary's face flushed. Ostentatiously he raised his hands above his head and went on clapping with redoubled energy for another minute or so.

Then he addressed the old foreman: "Was it you who stopped first?"

"Certainly not, comrade Party Secretary!" the old man was obviously scared, "it was this comrade here!"—and he pointed at me.

"So it was you, Ivanov?" the Party Secretary turned to me, speaking in a manner that boded no good.

"It could have been me," I had to admit. "I just got tired."

"Tired? You say you got tired of applauding the name of our Leader? We'll have to see about that!"

Then he declared the meeting closed, following me with a sinister glance as I went out.

That same night I had a dream. In it I had received a summons to the State Security Headquarters. There were several people sitting behind a table, all of them, as I could see from their uniforms, of high military rank.

"Name, family name, and patronymic!" demanded the colonel who sat in the centre of the group. On the table in front of him lay a file with my name on it in large block capitals, together with a photograph which showed me at the very moment I had stopped clapping at that day's meeting. Both the file and the photograph were turned for some reason towards me.

"Pyotr Sidorovich Ivanov," I said truthfully.

All of them sitting behind the table began to laugh.

"It's no good telling lies," the colonel said. "We know everything about you. Your real name is Benjamin Disraeli. You are an agent of the British Intelligence, and it is by means of you that Britain takes part in that international Jewish plot of doctors to poison Soviet leaders."

"But I am a thoroughbred Russian!" I began to protest.

"And what happened to your original papers?"

"As you very well know, they were lost in the last year of the Civil War!"

"How very convenient," they said. "Prove that you are not Benjamin Disraeli."

"Isn't it you who have to prove that I am?" I asked.

They all began laughing once more, this time even louder.

It was then that I decided to risk it.

"All right, I'll tell you truthfully who I really am."

"We know it anyway, but we want to hear it from you."

"I am one of Rasputin's bastards."

They burst out again in loud guffaws.

"You really made us laugh, British agent citizen Disraeli, you really did!"

"Cross my heart," I said. "I can prove it."

"How can you prove it?" asked the colonel.

"I've got all the original documents buried in my back yard," I said.

So a couple of them got up and went to disinter the documents, and having been convinced of their genuineness, they said: "Now we can call you comrade Rasputin instead of citizen Disraeli."

And, having whispered among themselves, they added, almost as an afterthought: "You realize, of course, comrade Rasputin, that we will have to execute you."

"But why?" I protested. "I have no part in the international Jewish doctors' plot to poison comrade Stalin!"

"Yes, but now there are other reasons you will have to be executed for—for being Rasputin's by-blow, as well as for deceiving the state. But as a reward for not being Jewish we'll allow you to choose the manner of your death. You can choose between the traditional Chinese execution when a fast-growing bamboo will be planted under you and the Greek one when you'll be put in a sack together with three tomcats and thrown into the sea."

And then I woke up, covered in a cold sweat. My wife was shaking me by the shoulders. "A phone call for you," she said, "it sounds very official."

I looked at my watch. It was only six in the morning.

I picked up the receiver.

"Citizen Ivanov," said a metallic voice, "don't bother going to work today. You're invited to appear at the Central State Security Headquarters at 4:15 sharp this afternoon."

And the caller hung up.

Later that day, however, the radio began playing sad music, and when I got to the Headquarters they looked confused and didn't know what to do with me. They sent me back home. In the street I saw people whispering to each other and looking furtively around. Loud wailing greeted me on our landing, coming from the neighbouring flat and no doubt belonging to the invalid Zaparshivenko who had miraculously survived twenty years in labour camps in Siberia. No sooner had I crossed the threshold of my own flat than I heard the radio announce that comrade Stalin was no longer with us.

And that was the end of the story.

So who do you think was sitting there behind the desk? Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs himself, comrade Arakcheev.

"Sit down, citizen Stambler," he says.

"It's all right," I say, "I'm not tired."

He takes out *Possev*, a Russian-language political anti-Soviet monthly published in West Germany and hands it over to me.

"Why did you sign this letter?"

I quickly looked into the periodical and saw the letter printed there. It was headed "WE PROTEST!" and was about a citizen's inalienable right to leave the country. There were about twenty signatures under it, mine among them.

"You know why, comrade Deputy Minister," I said. "Because I was refused permission to leave the country, even though I have relatives abroad and this case comes under a purely humanitarian act concerning the reunification of families. I consider this turning down of my application unjust."

"Never mind that," he becomes angry, "what we want to know is who wrote this letter and who asked you to sign it!"

"Honestly, comrade Deputy Minister, I can't remember, my mind keeps dwelling on my dear relatives longing to be reunited with me and on the injustice of having my application refused."

"But surely you can remember at least where the signing took place? In a flat? In a house? The information you give us may help us to consider your renewed application more favourably."

"I give you my word of honour, comrade Deputy Minister, I don't think there was any flat or house where I signed it."

"Surely you didn't do it in the street? You must have gone into somebody's domicile—what was the address?"

"Now that you say it, comrade Deputy Minister, I remember very vividly that it was in fact in the street that I signed."

"You don't expect me to believe that someone just came up to you in the street and asked you to sign a letter of protest for the enemy press?"

"Yes, that's exactly how it happened."

"So you are just walking in broad daylight through the city streets, and a total stranger approaches you with a piece of paper and a pen and says: 'Would you like to sign this?' Citizen Stambler, don't think we are fools! If you persist in your obstinacy, I can swear to you, and not just on my own behalf but on behalf of

comrade Pobedonostsev himself, our Minister of Internal Affairs, and indeed on behalf of the whole Soviet State that you will never in your life leave this country!”

He’s shaking with genuine or simulated anger—and I’m thinking to myself the while: it’s enough for God to decide that I should leave—and both you and your comrade Minister will vanish like a puff of smoke, and this whole pantomime set of your Soviet State will disintegrate!

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Pigeons flock together in the park where stale crusts of bread are being thrown away by a child. A friend of mine runs across the grass and flaps his arms like a bird, while an old rabbi, walking in circles around the fountain, blesses flowers.