

## Chapter 9

### Day 69 - Thirty Five Million

For years, until the collapse of Communism in Russia in 1991, the Soviets officially claimed that they lost 20 million people in their war against the Nazi Germany. The true figure is beginning to emerge and is, apparently, closer to 35 million. 35 million people. More than half of the population of Great Britain. The scale of the devastation that was visited on the country, which you can guess from that statistic, is truly staggering.

While the German Army was obviously a formidable war machine, the sheer number of losses it inflicted on the Red Army, particularly in the first few months of the war, was due to the suddenness of the attack. The blame for this can be laid squarely at Stalin's door.

Stalin was a great admirer of Hitler, having once been overheard, while talking to his generals after the news of the Night of the Long Knives reached him: "This is how you deal with the opposition". The mistake he made is the one we all often make – if we admire somebody, we assume that that somebody is just like us.

Now, Stalin was a very cautious man, often thoroughly preparing for something and then biding his time for years and years, as he did with his show trials and the purges in the late 1930's. He assumed that Hitler was the same and would never attack the Soviet Union with England still up his ass. That Hitler would at first try to get rid of Churchill, before tackling himself.

Unfortunately for 35 million Russians, Adolf Hitler was not at all like Joseph Stalin. Adolf Hitler was an insane risk taker who overruled the Wehrmacht High Command when it advised him that, by the summer of 1941, because of a series of delays, it was too late to launch Operation Barbarossa, which was originally planned for spring of that year.

According to his generals, on 22<sup>nd</sup> June, Stalin went into a stupor, which lasted for three weeks. All he was doing for three weeks was to repeat to anybody who would listen: "Lenin gave me this country and I have fucked up." To his credit, he eventually snapped out of it and took control of the situation, though he would still occasionally exhibit his penchant for panicking in a tight corner. On 21<sup>st</sup> December 1941, for instance, when German tanks were within 10 miles of the Red Square, he collected a team of his bodyguards and fled the Soviet capital. He returned next morning.

#### ***EXT. - HOSPITAL GROUNDS - NIGHT***

PAVEL, who is now ambulant, most of his bandages gone, is walking hand in hand with BOUNIA. The two are obviously besotted and can't keep their hands off each other.

#### **PAVEL**

You are Jewish, Bounia, aren't you? And I am a Siberian peasant.  
What a pair. The odd couple.

#### **BOUNIA**

I'll become a Jewish peasant for you, Pavlousha. JSP - Jewish  
Siberian Peasant. Not to be confused with JSP - Jewish Siberian  
Princess.

*(now seriously)*

I'll go anywhere for you, Pavel Sokurov. I will. Let's just wait until the war is over.

*(dreamy)*

Oh, Pavlousha, we're going to be so happy together. One big family, lots and lots of kids. I do love you.

***INT. - DUGOUT - NIGHT***

BOUNIA is sitting on a mattress listening to the radio. A GANGLY SOLDIER appears in the doorway. He has to stoop to get in.

**GANGLY SOLDIER**

Bounia, Bounia - a letter from your mother in Canada!

BOUNIA opens the letter and the camera zooms in on the letter while we hear the voiceover.

**YENTA (V.O.)**

Dear Bounichka. How's my big little girl, defending democracy against Hitler? Everybody here is very proud of you. Your mother is all right. Last week, me and Morris Levinson got married. What could I do? Your mother is no spring chicken anymore... Morris is a good man. When we are finally together again, won't be long, I'm sure, he'll no doubt welcome you with open arms. The shop is doing well. I've figured a great new way of restocking the clothes section - buy them in Detroit across the border where they are cheaper. There's just one little problem ... DISSOLVE to

***EXT. - OUTSIDE OF A CUSTOMS HOUSE - DAY***

We see YENTA get off a bus carrying dozens of shopping bags. She heads for a sign saying WASHROOMS and disappears inside. CUT to YENTA emerging from the washrooms. The shopping bags are gone and she is now absolutely ginormous and sweating profusely under layers and layers of clothes she has just put on inside. Followed by the watchful eyes of the United States Customs officers and insolently singing under her breath, but still quite audibly, "Pardon me, boy is that the Chattanooga Choo-Choo", she casually strolls through the Customs Hall and boards a waiting train. DISSOLVE back to...

BOUNIA reading the same letter. The same GANGLY SOLDIER enters the dugout.

**GANGLY SOLDIER**

Bounia, Comrade General wants to talk to you.

***INT. - A DIFFERENT, MORE SPACIOUS DUGOUT - DAY***

The GENERAL is waiting for BOUNIA in the middle of the dugout. BOUNIA enters through the doorway.

**BOUNIA**

*(salutes)*

Comrade General, Corporal Itkis at your command.

**GENERAL**

At ease, Corporal.

*(anything but at ease himself)*

You know Corporal Itkis that the unit, in pursuit of retreating fascist troops, is about to cross into Austria. After that, it's all the way over to Berlin to finish off the Nazi monster.

*(even more embarrassed)*

Bounia, you have been a model Red Army soldier, everybody knows that. By all rights, you should be coming with us. Unfortunately, I have just received my orders for you to stay behind. It's about your mother. Somebody up there in the High Command is worried that you might try to defect to the West.

**BOUNIA**

But Comrade General...

**GENERAL**

I know, I know. Of course, we all know that a Young Communist League member like you would never do such a thing, but...

***EXT. - RAILWAY SIDING. STUPAVA - DAY***

FADE IN to the sound of an accordion. We can see a soldier sitting on an embankment playing the instrument, while all around him other soldiers are boarding a waiting train. SHIFT to the right to BOUNIA pinning down PAVEL against the side of the train, covering his face and neck with tear-stained kisses.

**PAVEL**

Baby, everybody's looking.

**BOUNIA**

I don't care who's looking and who's not. They can all get stuffed.

There is an unmistakable air of sexual intimacy between the two. CUT to BOUNIA running after the departing train and waving to PAVEL at the same time. Our last sight of PAVEL is of him vainly shouting to BOUNIA against the chugga-chugga of the accelerating locomotive:

**PAVEL**

Who's writing first?

For the first time, we hear a voiceover:

**VOICEOVER**

**My mother will never see Pavel again. The system not only robbed her of her mother but also of what will turn out to be her life's only true love.**

The camera holds hard on the train as it slowly disappears in the distance.

Actually, Pavel is an invention. I thought that, at that point, the story was becoming a little too Jewey and that introducing a nice Russian lad would be a healthy thing to do, balancing things out a little bit. The real-life Pavel was a Jewish boy called Zyunya who was fighting in a different unit from Mother. Mother has shown me the puppy-love letters he was sending her, once a week. Seemed like a really nice guy. After the war, Mother went to live with him and his family in Odessa. The rest is shrouded in mystery. Somehow, it did not work out and she came back to Kiev. She has since refused to talk to me about it.

Needless to say, my father never missed an opportunity to rub Mother's nose in it. And what an evil woman she was that even Zyunya's family could not put up with her. And how he, Gersh, was kind enough to pick her up from the gutter when nobody else wanted her. Etc etc etc. You get the idea.

I've never had a Love-of-My-Life. A fair deal of screwing, some of it pretty heavy-duty, but no Lurve. A wasted opportunity, if you ask me. Too late now.

Lurve. That weird, many-splendoured thing. A psychologist called R.D. Laing died a little while ago. He did studies of families, where he found that everybody was, of course, acting out of love, while privately pursuing their own sordid little agendas. And yet and yet, we ARE capable, in pursuit of love, of acts of incredible selflessness. Or foolishness, depending on how you look at it. Sometimes, even prepared to die for it. Va savoir, as the French say. The infamous Riddle of Love and Death.

Leaving Russia, arriving in Canada. Eventually.

***EXT. - SUBURBAN STREET - DAY***

Mother and son are walking, carrying their luggage, through an affluent Toronto suburb on a beautiful magical autumnal Indian summer evening towards a 10-storey apartment block. In front of them are YENTA and her husband MORRIS. Nobody is talking. A dateline appears in the spotless blue sky.

**Toronto, Canada, 7 November, 1973**

With the camera following right behind the small group they reach the building, take the elevator and all walk into YENTA's apartment. Still in total silence, the four put down the luggage, walk into the middle of the room and turn to face each other. MORRIS turns to his wife.

## MORRIS

Well, Yenta, this is your daughter and this is your grandson.

We can hear the Anatevka score coming up from behind the background of urban traffic, children playing in the streets, neighbours chatting to each other across their balconies.

Canada. Bunny Gold. A nice Jewish girl. A little too nice. Would not let me go down on her. No matter how I tried. A liberated, sussed-out man that I had become by that time. “What’s going on here, Bunny?”. “What’s such a big deal?” “Nothing”. Until one day I twigged. In those pre-PC days, Rochdale College, my crazy student dorm, used to show softcore porn movies. So one day, we went to see one together. Which was okay, until a scene came between two women. One look at our Bunny and you could see right away that her pussy was so wet – it was about to start dripping on the floor. Aha. Got ya! She obviously thought that a muff diving session, even with a man, would send her completely out of control, stalking the leafy streets of Forest Hill in the dead of the night in search of nice Jewish girls of similar persuasion.

Then one day, after we had split up, a movement in the room woke me up in the middle of the night. Bunny, standing in front of my bed, grinning sheepishly. What the fuck, I distinctly remembered locking the front door. Turns out, my Argentinean roommate had let her in, after she knocked on the door of the unit.

Captive audience. It’s now or never. So, after a token resistance on her part, I gave her the licking of her life. Leaving behind a raging lesbian, total disgrace on her nice Jewish family from Hamilton, Ontario.

Speaking of lesbians, Uppermills has the highest number of gay women per capita in the UK. Probably in the world, for all I know. A little town in the middle of nowhere in the North of England. Makes a change from boring aging hippies like me. No, let me amend that. Boring aged hippies like me. Started with several couples living in a hamlet a few miles away from the town and now there are gay cafes, gay bars, gay restaurants, gay health food emporiums. And even a gay shoe shop! A few years ago, they all started having babies. Artificial insemination. If forty years ago somebody had told me that I was gonna end up my days in a place full of gay women pushing prams – I’d tell them to have their heads examined.

It can be difficult at times. You’re the Oppressor. But I suppose it’s good for my education. Or was good.

I’m really putting my neck on the chopping block here. Some people can choose to interpret anything you write in any way they want. But what the hell I figure if a miracle happens and I survive an advanced stage of prostate cancer and then find somebody crazy enough to publish this book (two miracles in fact), by the time a militant lesbian gets to me, I’ll already be killed first by either Islamic Jihad or extremist West Bank Jewish settlers. Or both. At the same time. And you can only be dead once.

Was that the right past perfect tense construction – “I’ll already be killed”? I blame the Fab Four. But then again my linguistic skills have never been my strongest suit.

***FADE IN SLOWLY:***

***EXT. - POTATO FIELD - DAY***

Early morning shift of the potato combine detail at a kibbutz in Israel. We are looking straight at, and on the same level as, a combine moving towards us. The potato-digging contraption at the front of the combine is slowly turning around its widely spaced bars when, between two cranking down bars, the date line appears and travels to the ground until disappearing:

**Kibbutz Yagur, Israel**

**15 July, 1976**

YOSSIE (looking already slightly out of place with his shoulder-length hair and his Zapata moustache) and another CANADIAN STUDENT are sitting on top of the combine, sifting out bad potatoes. A group of Israeli workers are huddled nearby around a radio.

**YOSSIE**

I wish I could speak the language a bit. With all this business going on - it would be useful.

**CANADIAN STUDENT**

Me, too. Maybe skipping all those Hebrew lessons at the *schul* was a mistake, after all.

Suddenly, the Israelis around the radio go completely berserk, cheering wildly, hugging each other and throwing their hats in the air. YOSSIE stops a PASSING ISRAELI.

**YOSSIE**

What's going on, Amos?

**PASSING ISRAELI**

They've released the hostages.

YOSSIE follows the hurrying Israeli with a gaze and turns to the CANADIAN STUDENT.

**YOSSIE**

Isn't that nice? Maybe that Idi Amin isn't quite as mad as I thought he was. I never would have thought he'd let them go just like that, though.

***INT. - CROWDED KIBBUTZ CANTEEN - DAY***

A general air of excitement is reigning in the canteen: people laughing, talking to each other animatedly with their mouths full of food, some still glued to their transistor radios. YOSSIE and

CANADIAN STUDENT are in the process of carrying their food trays to a table when they are stopped by an exuberant ELDERLY KIBBUTZNIK.

**ELDERLY KIBBUTZNIK**

Ze Israeli Army is ze best in ze vorld.

**YOSSIE**

I'm sure it is.

As he looks at the departing ELDERLY KIBBUTZNIK, he turns to CANADIAN STUDENT.

**CANADIAN STUDENT**

What on earth has that got to do with anything?

**YOSSIE**

Search me. The old man must have started losing his Polish marbles.

***INT. - COMMUNAL LIVING QUARTERS. - NIGHT***

YOSSIE and CANADIAN STUDENT are walking through the door. They start going about their pre-going-to-bed little activities: brushing their teeth, changing clothes, we can hear the toilet being flushed - when both of them, at the same time, see a copy of the English-language Jerusalem Post somebody left on a bed. The front page is one huge headline: "DARING ARMY RAID ON ENTEBBE" The two men look at each other at the same time.

**YOSSIE, CANADIAN STUDENT**

Whoops.

How many people have I managed to piss off so far in this book? Christians, Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Confucians. Communists, Fascists, Russians, Israelis, Arabs, gays. Polish kibbutzniks. Virgins. Nice Jewish girls. Must remember to change the names.

Nice Jewish girls. Like every other one I met in Canada, Bunny, was an ardent Zionist. Without an iota of guilt about what we've done to these people. Me, being me, I do however somehow feel responsible for the plight of the Palestinians. As a good Jew.

***EXT. - RAILWAY SIDING - DAY***

Long-to-medium view of the train. There has been no change from the last time we saw it.

***INT. - STATIONARY TRAIN - DAY***

We catch a strand of another conversation.

**ZAHRA**

...What do you know about being a refugee, anyway? Living like an animal in a camp in Lebanon, every time I'd go shopping in town the Arab kids won't leave me alone: "There goes a Palestinian who sold her country to the Jews." Hungry and ragged, surviving on charity and odd jobs. One day, I picked up an orange from somewhere and started eating it. My mother saw it and slapped me on the face. "You will not eat another orange until we come back to our orange grove in Haifa." And I haven't.

**BOUNIA**

My people have suffered and your people have suffered and many other people have had a hard time of it, too. What do you want - a gold medal for suffering? This is not a victimisation Olympics...

***EXT. - RAILWAY SIDING - NIGHT***

A much tighter view of the train with the commandoes in the process of moving right up to the train. The total silence is only broken up by occasional mutterings of men talking to each other on walkie-talkies. It is crystal-clear that an assault is imminent.

***INT. - STATIONARY TRAIN - NIGHT***

All the windows have now been boarded up with makeshift remains of broken-up train seats. BOUNIA and ZAHRA are talking through another shift.

**BOUNIA**

...Can you tell me what's happening. Or would that be ...uhm...

**ZAHRA**

*(with a grin)*

...unprofessional? Is that the word you were looking for? It was looking good for a while but now it's looking bad again, I'm afraid... But if we all come out of this in one piece, maybe we could meet in Canada one day. I'll bring my daughter with me - I would like her to meet a good Jew.

As we look at BOUNIA's face being torn apart by conflicting emotions, we become aware that the Anatevka score has come back and, once more, its emotional impact is carrying a scene in its stride.