

A Tear in the Curtain

JOHN SYMONS



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Dedicated to
Vladimir Bukovsky
with deep respect and admiration:
expelled from the Soviet Union after twelve years
in the GULAG Archipelago, 1977,
author of
To Build a Castle, 1978,
and
Moscow Trial, 1996,
Candidate in the Presidential election campaign
in Russia, 2007-2008

‘Valiant for Truth’

This is the story of three families:

A Hungarian family
Tibor, Helena and Giori
And their mother Eva;

A Russian family
Andrei,
His parents Igor and Natalya
And his grandmother, 'Babushka',
and her friend Dmitry;
and

A British family
Margaret, her children Stephen and Elizabeth,
Her parents John and Barbara Durham,
And their Hungarian friends Geza and Miriam

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August, 1991

Sussex

‘MUM, what’s happened to grandpa?’ said Stephen. ‘Come quickly!’

Margaret stopped making tea in her kitchen in Sussex and half ran into the sitting room. John Durham, her father, was there watching the television. The screen showed an immense crowd of people in front of a white office building beside the Moscow River.

A tall, stocky man with thick white hair stood high on a tank facing the crowd. Two other men stood on either side of him. They were holding up makeshift armour to protect him from snipers’ bullets.

The man, Boris Yeltsin, the President of Russia, was saying, ‘*Demokratiya pridyot*’, ‘Democracy will come’. The crowd cheered back, ‘*Ro-ss-i-ya*’, ‘Russia’, ‘Yeltsin, Yeltsin!’

Tears were pouring down Mr Durham’s face. On his knee was a black and white photograph, taken thirty-five years ago, of Margaret and three of her friends, all shivering, in swimming suits on the beach at Woody Bay, with the cliffs behind them. One of

them Stephen could just recognise as his Aunt Helena.

‘Is Grandpa all right, Mum?’ Stephen asked.

And turning to his mother, he saw that she, too, was sobbing, as she went over and threw her arms around her father.



Day after day that week Stephen sat on the sofa alongside his grandfather and his mother watching television reports from Moscow. He and his sister, Elizabeth, two years younger than him, did a lot of the shopping and cooking so Mum and Grandpa could watch everything as it happened. John and Margaret also listened hour after hour to radio broadcasts, in Russian, from Moscow. They saw on the television screen events no one had predicted: the collapse of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; the locking and sealing of all its offices across a vast country; the seizure, by President Yeltsin’s new Russian government, of all the records of the Party’s countless crimes against Russians and foreigners; and the return to Moscow of Mr Gorbachev, President of the dying Soviet Union, from his holiday home on the coast of the Black Sea where, he said, he had been held captive by his subordinates in the Communist Party.

One evening in Moscow a crane was brought into Lubyanka Square. It toppled from its tall, granite pedestal the statue of the first head of Lenin’s infamous secret police, the Cheka, set up in 1917. Impotent for the moment, Officers of the KGB, the hated successor of the Cheka, watched what was happening

from their dark offices on the Square. Countless innocent people had been tortured and shot in the cellars of that building.

Statues of Lenin himself, the begetter of the Russian Civil War and of all the terrors and famines of the past seventy-five years, crashed down in front of crowds all over the country. Russians were rejoicing as they seized the chance to free themselves; it might never come again. How long freedom would last no one knew, but it was to be used to the full as long as they had it.

And all week Stephen and Elizabeth's grandfather John and mother Margaret kept looking at the old photograph.

'Tibor,' said John, 'if only Tibor...'

'Whatever will Helena be thinking? And Andrei...'

'Perhaps we'll find out at last what happened to him.'

For them this snap was now an icon. Somehow, although John had taken such care of it over the years, it was creased. When the light played on it, it seemed that the gap that had at one time kept Andrei apart from the others had been removed, and all four of them were held in one embrace.

1956

Woody Bay

‘ONE more swim,’ said Tibor, *‘please.’*

It had been a long day on the beach at Woody Bay. By now the Durham family were the only people left there. The tide was going out quickly, leaving a stretch of smooth clean sand, cool after the afternoon’s heat. All the picnic food was long since eaten.

‘All right, one more,’ said John Durham.

‘Just one,’ added his wife, Barbara.

‘Thank you.’ Andrei’s English had hardly a trace of a Russian accent. ‘Thank you.’

Cheering and shouting in a mixture of English and Hungarian, Tibor raced into the water, followed by his sister Helena, and after them Andrei and Margaret. Tibor’s Hungarian changed into Russian as he kicked up the waves to splash Andrei and the others.

They all struck out, swimming quickly across the bay and back, not talking now but grunting and groaning from their efforts. As usual, Tibor won the race. He was four years older than the others, strong and fit.