

RUSSIAN BLACK BATHHOUSE

(translated by Natalia Melnikova)

Our hotel for new immigrants in Tel-Aviv occupies four floors. There are only two gas stoves on the seventh floor where I live. In the evening, when I want to warm up some canned food for dinner, I have to wait up to forty minutes. Old Grigory Savelievich stands in line in front of me with a pot in his hands. A mechanical engineer, just like me, Grigory Savelievich comes from the old school, he built Dneproges. He saved all his diplomas of honor. He is eighty two years old, and his wife is seventy five. Their two children live in Rishon le Zion and promise to move them there. Since the children have not taken them yet, the old folks live in our Olim hotel and stand in line to the kitchen. Grigory Savelievich is eighteen years older than I am, but I do not consider myself being old, though, probably, it is time to. I have been living in Tel Aviv for a year already and work as a plumber's assistant after school. It is fine. As long as I live in the hotel, the money I make is enough for me. Living across the corridor from my room is a young woman named Valia, from Tashkent. She is thirty-four and her son is eight and a half. Valia treats me with respect because I managed to find a good job, which is not easy. When I get my paycheck, I buy some candy for her kid. Valia always shakes hands with me, but I do not hold her hand for long. She never pays any special attention to me. The palm of her palm is always dry. In fact, I started writing my story because of her hand. Or because everything in the world repeats itself.

Another thirty-four year old woman with dry palms, and I find myself once again a plumber's assistant. Only this time the plumber is Tunisian and it is me who is sixty-four, not him. This plumber's name is Boaz, the one before was Sergey Pakhomich, everybody used to call him just by his middle name – Pakhomich. These are just small details but they matter to me.

Pakhomich found me in a train, which at the end of 1944, was going from the battlefield to the East. If it was not for him, I could have possibly ended up in some orphanage, because they were pulling minors off the trains at every station. For better or for worse, but I had not gone to the orphanage. My papers were not in order, but Pakhomich was familiar with my story. He knew that these were someone else's documents. Pakhomich had been hiding me until we arrived to Chelyabinsk. He had some relatives there, and told me that we would not go any farther, we would stay in the city. I added a year to my age and got a passport. Then, with that passport, I found

a metal worker's job at the aviation factory. I lived in a dormitory while Pakhomich settled in with some Kazakhs. A typical Kazakh house starts with a room for sheep, then more rooms for cows and horses, and then finally a room for the Kazakh's themselves. There is a strong odor, but at least the warmth stays inside. In my dormitory, there were no sheep and cows and so it was terribly cold.

Pakhomich worked as a plumber in our dormitory; there happened to be a vacancy, and he begged me to take the job. He promised to teach me everything in three days; he also said that this job was better than the one at the factory. Though I still had to work twelve-hour shifts, I could lock myself up in the utility room and take a nap.

Only schmucks took the job at the factory. These were mostly country boys, too young to be drafted, and some ignorant women. Those discharged from the army were not too eager to work there.

For a plumber there was plenty to do in the dormitory: a couple of the twelve sinks got clogged, or the radiators would break, or the boiler. I sold my food stamps immediately – living alone, I did not need them and ate in the canteen. Besides, you could not get much for the food stamps: some bread, cabbage, barley, and the “sviripianoye” oil. You can live your whole life and never hear about this oil. It is pressed from a smelly, yellow plant that has a bitter flavor, making cooking oil.

Some evenings we went to a dance, but I never danced with girls. We danced on the edge of the dance floor, boys in felt boots marked time in front of each other. Those who did not work the night shift played cards or got drunk.

Having finished the shift, I used to go to my room and lie near the radiator. I installed the two-section radiator next to my bed so it was warm there. A guy who stoked the fire in the furnace and a cart-driver with a pockmarked face occupied the other two beds in the room. I tried to nestle up against the radiator and to think about something else – about decent food, or that rascal who unscrewed the tap from the sink. I was afraid to fall asleep.

I, of course, was very worldly-wise, but I kept seeing the execution in my dreams.

I saw my mother and a five year old sister falling down. I saw myself and my brother crawling out of the shooting pit. I saw the partisan squad with whom I fought against the Germans for two years

By the age of fifteen, I had been wounded four times. Two pieces of shrapnel are still in my body – one in my skull and the other in my lower back. But the officials refuse to recognize me as war veteran because I do not have any certificates, and my witnesses have already left this world. The young lady from the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption told me, “The shrapnel does not prove anything. Anyone can stuff his head with shrapnel; an electric appliance could have exploded just as easily.” I politely agreed.

When in 1945 I heard someone say that the Jews safely hid on the home front, I immediately got into fight; by sixty four I became calmer and do not want to bicker over my wounds. Besides, I got the last one by pure accident: I was coming back from a mission and passed by the station where the guys from our squad were fighting against the police. I heard, “Hey, boy, take that rifle from that wounded guy and fire back!” and the next thing I knew – I was in a hospital. In fact, they did not shout “boy,” they called me by my name, but as it turned out, I lived all my life with somebody else’s papers, and it is heartbreaking for me to remember my real name.

When I was shutting my eyes in that room, it seemed to me that I was firing at somebody. At the Ukrainian policemen-collaborators or the Germans – we never took prisoners.

I still see these dreams though fifty years passed since that time. Now I usually get very tired at work and fall fast asleep. It is hard to be the plumber’s assistant – I have to carry radiators up the stairs because my boss does not know yet how old I am.

At least the food is ok in Israel. Only the “sviripyanoye” oil is lacking. But I am not such a great fan of eating, I never was. In 1945 they used to give us the soup at the canteen – barley, nettle and, if you were lucky, a piece of potato. Soup - by day, bread – by night. When I had some money, I used to buy something from the market-women, bread or sugar.

The head of our dormitory and my boss was Polish. She also was a counselor of the dormitory and each day she tried to persuade our drudges not to go to bed with their clothes on. She used to tell me off occasionally, but I always answered with a snarl. I had spent two years at the front and therefore did not enjoy being told what to do by a woman. By the way, there were just a few women in our squad – the commissary had a wife but I rarely saw her; and also there was the old Anisimovna, our cook. Perhaps, there were a few more but they were manlike. I had an idea of where children come from, but that was all I knew. I even blushed like a girl when people swore, I could not get used to this for a long time. For that reason, the head of

the dormitory was like an alien to me. Her name was Stella. As I recall, she wore knitted woolen dresses and snow-white felt boots. Some days she used to leave the boots in her office and walk around in stilettos, all high and mighty. She also had a cashmere shawl with a flower print thrown over her shoulders. Fifty years later, I still remember her like this.

In 1944, my boss was thirty-four. Damn, this Pole was a one beautiful woman! A shock of blonde hair, nice dimples, high neckline, and she had such a lovely Polish accent... Her husband was killed at the front a year before. He was also Polish, from the Polish division. When I tried to imagine him, I thought that such a woman should have been married at least to a general. Our squad's commander was a major, but I was unable to picture her even standing next to him.

There was a Polish unit camping near the factory, and I knew that the Polish soldiers built her a big log cottage and a bathhouse. That was all I knew about her then. Sometimes the drudges called her "a bitch," but she was above acknowledging these "boys'" rude comments.

I remember I was lying in bed; it was getting dark. That day something broke in the dormitory, but we managed to fix it. There were four hours left until the end of the shift. The furnace worker and the cart driver were absent; Stella entered the room, turned on the light, and told me discontentedly, "Boy, how long are you going to lie in bed with dirty feet? When will you learn to take a shower?" She searched through my nightstand, threw all my things out, looked at them, and frowned.

Then she said, "Boy, underwear should not be that dirty. Here is the key; you know where I live, don't you? If my daughter is not at home, open the door yourself. Chop some wood in the yard. Do you know how to heat up the Russian bathhouse?" "Dobrze!" she added in Polish. I said, "I haven't finished my shift yet, it ends at seven," but she disregarded my words and said, "Your work can wait," and I dragged my feet to her house.

The solid Siberian log house stood on a hill. The gate was locked, but I decided not to bother with the key. Jumped over the fence, and started chopping wood. The logs were delivered from the Polish quarters. The daughter came home when I was already heating the bathhouse. She was about fifteen years old and looked like her mother, only with red hair and freckles. The daughter looked at me and asked, "Was it my mom who sent you?" "Yes," I said. She spoke perfect Russian, as if she was a Siberian. The daughter was in the seventh grade. I was year and a half older than her, but I missed several years because of the war. I was heating the bathhouse while she

was doing her homework. I kept looking over her shoulder and giving her hints. I decided that I did not like her. The daughter was terribly dull; it seemed that she would fall asleep at any moment. Even her name was soporific – Faina.

It was completely dark when my boss came home. I looked at her frowningly and said that everything was ready. She put her purse onto the stool and suddenly stroked my head. I did not like to be treated as a little boy, so I blushed. The Pole said, “Do not go outside without a jacket, boy, you’ll catch a cold.” I did not answer. I had lived two years in dugouts with partisans and was decorated with two medals. I never caught a cold even without a jacket. The woman entered the bathhouse, inhaled, and said, “Enough.”

She asked me to fill the cauldron with pure snow. And so I started bringing the snow, but it melted immediately, and there was very little water left. At last, I filled the cauldron and returned to the house. She said, “Go and wash your hands, boy!” I followed her gaze, took a floor-cloth, and wiped the snow off the floor. I knew that she hated when the floor was wet.

Then we had dinner. Stella took a bottle of genuine "Moscow" vodka from the sideboard, not home-brew, and took a sip. She smiled at us the whole time and called me, with a slight accent, a “fine fellow.” She said to her daughter, “the boy works with me” and went on asking us about the school. I felt sluggish and started to fall asleep at the table. It was unusual to have a normal food, just like it used to be at home. The Pole went to her room and brought me a pile of men’s underwear, a towel, and a bathrobe. I had never seen terrycloth towels before. Our family was not poor, but my parents had many children. All those children were killed in the same day. Only my brother and I survived, because when the shots were fired, my brother pushed me down into the pit.

The boss said, “Go wash, boy,” and kept on talking to her daughter. I went to the bathhouse. I was anxious. I had some strange premonition but could not find the words to explain it.

I sat down on a wide planed bench and started washing. When I finished, the Pole came in through the back room. They had three large rooms and a corridor in their house, and you could get to the bathhouse through the back room. The Pole was wearing a robe, and I squatted down, trying to hide from her. She said, ‘Why are you hiding, boy?’ And suddenly we became familiar and I started to call her “Stella.” Then she told me, “Lie down, I will wash your back!”

I lay on my belly, and she started washing me. Very slowly. Nothing else was going on, but I felt somewhat strange. I obeyed her as if I were drunk. Then we returned to the room and had more tea. She turned on the radio and said, “Well, boy, it’s my turn to go wash.” Meanwhile her daughter looked at me, shrugged her shoulders, and left for her room. I was sitting in a terry bathrobe and figuring out what I would put on to go back to my dormitory. Could it be that she had burned my clothes?

But I never returned to my dormitory.

In ten minutes, Stella cried to me from the bathhouse, “Hey, boy, come help me!” And I went, still unsuspecting. She told me, “It’s your turn to wash me now,” rose on the bench and handed me a sponge. Sponges were made from the rough burlap, and that was the first time I saw pink soap. “What do I do with the robe?” I asked. “Hang it up next to mine,” she answered in Polish looking at me from the dark.

I was not sure I liked what happened after this. It was not dirty, and I could have described this, but I just do not like when old people speak of such things. That is what seems improper to me. As for the bathhouse, what happened there was too quick to feel anything. When the bathhouse got cold and the floorboards started to cool down, Stella dressed me and took me to her room. She did not even close the door – just put two beds together and said, “Lie down”; but I asked her to close the door, because she was screaming and mumbling some Polish words, and I was afraid that she would wake her daughter.

Before falling asleep, I laughed and thought, “This is where children come from.”

Stella didn’t go to bed at all. She told me in the morning, “You don’t go to work today. Your food is in the kitchen!”

The next night was absolutely the same. However, I still was not enjoying it, maybe for the whole week. But after a week, I could hardly wait till she would come home. I never returned to my job in the dormitory.

Now I realize that I was happy just once in my life. And I loved only one woman, though I have had two good wives and my children are grown-ups now.

Stella returned from work at noon and shouted at the door, “Kids, have you eaten?” As for me, all I did was eat all day. And I read “The Captain’s Daughter.”

She had a big library, and later I read Balzac and Maupassant, but that morning I stayed in my robe and read Pushkin. That was my first book after the war began!

Thus started my “war-time marriage.” Next night she told me that they gave my plumbing job to some big country guy. Stella said, “You have no business there, and it’s his lucky day, I took him from the shop!” In the mornings I read, then helped Faina do her homework. She turned out to be an awfully lazy moron. She was a failure in algebra. I practiced the rules with her and then did her homework every day. I sat with her and kept repeating over and over again the cube of sum and the cube of difference. Every afternoon one of the Polish soldiers paid a visit and brought a bag with soldiers’ breeches and blouses. Soon Stella asked me to take these clothes to the market and sell them without too much bargaining. Some things were selling for thirty hundred, others - for twenty eight. I used to pay the soldiers off at home; the money was in the cabinet in Stella’s room; as for the civilians, I asked them to come later. Pakhomich told me that Stella controls “krasnushniks” – railroad thieves.

I told Pakhomich about my life. Oh God, he was so upset, I even can not describe it! He kept repeating, ”Zin’ka, Zin’ka, you got involved with a prostitute!” But it was not true. And I was not able to explain to Pakhomich how much I loved Stella.

In the spring, they started to bring lengths of fabric to our house. I was to carry them to the tailors. Only then I realized how many Jews were in Chelyabinsk. They, too, felt that I belong to them. The tailors gave money back to Stella. I did not let her do anything at home: I cooked, I did the laundry, and I stoked the oven. I did not want her to smudge her hands. Faina, the daughter, was aware that her mother took a lover, but never said a word. And I never asked her if Stella had had somebody before me. From time to time she went to the Polish barracks, but always returned early and sober. However, she never took me with her, only once, when Klavdia Shulzhenko gave a concert in the city. I was dressed to kill! She ordered the fur-lined breeches and boots for me, like the ones that Communist party members wore. She posed me as her nephew; and the Jews, who tailored for me, had doubts as to whether this was true, but they held their tongues. In the evenings, we used to throw parties. Mainly Polish officers and their girlfriends were there. One of the girlfriends was also Polish; she was a sergeant at the unit. But all the others were Russian and, moreover, quite educated: accountants, engineers, factory intelligentsia. I would not say anything bad about Stella’s friends; it was just that they liked to hit the bottle. At some point Stella started teasing her girlfriends, “Hell with your guys, look at my Zin’ka, he is a real man!” Stella knew it was not my real name, but asked me keep it a secret.

Stella's friends smiled ironically and looked at me captiously.

Then she started sending me to them. First time it happened with Lilya, who worked at the factory. One day, when we were sitting at the table and played preference, Lilya asked, as if by chance, "Do you mind if I go wash in your bathhouse?" Everybody was already on a bender, except for me. Lilya took the bathrobe and left to the bathhouse. Few minutes later Stella sent me there to help Lilya to wash her back. I do not remember what I was thinking while walking across the corridor to the bathhouse, to wash this mature woman. Perhaps, I thought that the war was still going on, but I was done with it; that I spent each night with a beautiful woman – my wife; that there was a woman waiting for me in the bathhouse, and three others were sitting behind me and whispering. I came into the bathhouse and Lilya immediately locked the door up. An hour or so passed, and Stella knocked, "Enough!"

Since that night Stella's girlfriends had become my duty.

I asked Stella, "Why do you do this?" – "I prove to them that no man is like you."

About three times a week one or another woman was coming with a bundle of underwear, and I went to heat the bathhouse. I detested them all. I detested their skin, their ribs. I am sixty-four now, and I should think about Stella's friends like those young wartime girls. All of them were around thirty. Two were widows. But the memory of these hateful thirty year old crones still makes my flesh crawl. Every night I was hiding from them in the arms of my wife. Stella was asking, "Did you like any of them?" I always answered sincerely, "No, I need nobody but you." But she laughed at me, saying "You will be fine, it's not as bad as it gets." I called her "wife," because she always was my wife. Clearly, Stella didn't want to let me go either. She was going to leave for Poland and wanted to take me with her. But first I had to receive a driver's certificate. "We will own a business in Poland, and my husband must be a driver." I already had a passport, and I received a "husband-driver's" certificate. I myself had to leave; I had been wanted for year and a half already. Our squad's commander in Ukraine gave me somebody's papers and a sack with money and said that there was nothing else he could do for me. I had shot two Ukrainian policemen-collaborators, shot them right in the middle of the village. These policemen snitched on my brother and me to the Nazis. We were unlucky enough to knock at their door the next day after our execution.

Now I look in the window of my hotel and see the boys driving around Tel-Aviv. Each of them has a life, which nobody knows of. Then they will grow old too,

and will have to sum up their lives. They will sit in an empty room, at the other end of the world, and each of them will recall his own war and his own “Chelyabinsk.” I am ashamed to admit that I feel no remorse. Many of the things that I did in my life I would have done again. But I would never admit it to my children.

The summer in Chelyabinsk is quite short. The summer passed as if a dream. Stella got pregnant. That was the final chapter of our family life –the most quiet and the most terrible. “I want to have a child before I leave Russia,” she kept repeating. The idea of becoming a father scared me, but I liked the fact that she was pregnant. I liked taking her to the beach where, even with a belly, she was the most beautiful woman in the world. I liked the fact that I had become a man in the house and kicked all her girlfriends out. Nobody was dragging me to the bathhouse to fondle, and nobody was trapping me in the daylight on the street. I earned my freedom. But Stella suffered a lot during her pregnancy and had to stay in the hospital on bed rest from the sixth month until the day of birth. Until the day when she delivered a boy, my son. He is probably forty six now. And he lives somewhere in Poland or in America. Or possibly in Argentina, or even near me in Tel Aviv. Theoretically, any man who is forty-six now can happen to be my son. But I know nothing about him. Nothing at all, zero. He was a month old when I held him for the last time. Stella came out of her room and said, “Leave. Take the money from the cabinet and leave.” I took the money from the cabinet, put on my clothes, and my life ended, once and forever. I had no arguments, and I didn’t want to apologize.

Then there was my service in the Navy and three years of prison camp. Then I was studying for many years and apparently, learned how to answer all questions, no matter how difficult they are. But there is a question that still puzzles me. How could that hulking mammoth girl with red hair – her daughter, who was a failure in algebra, whom I hated and agreed to stand just because of her mother – how could she got pregnant too? I still do not understand how it happened.

There was a sixteen year old boy, the husband; there was a beautiful woman, his first wife; there was the stepdaughter with red hair, a year younger than the husband. There was a fearful fabled bathhouse that knew and saw everything; there were grown-ups who played games with us; and there was the terrible war that was excusing everyone.