RAMI BLECKT

JOURNEYS IN THE SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE

A STORY OF THOSE WHO HAVE FOUND IT

Rami Bleckt

Journeys in the Search for the Meaning of Life. A story of those who have found it

«Благо-Дарение»

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The author of this book is a person with the extraordinary fate. He gave professional consultations to thousands of people from all over the world, conducted seminars and workshops in many countries and travelled a lot. This is the reason that even for a minor character in this book we are faced with real people. A part of the described events the author experienced himself.The book contains neither religious nor political concept. This wonderful book of interesting people's realistic stories gives reader not only a pleasant way of spending time but teachers a great deal of useful things. Every person could practically find something important in it that would change his life for the best.

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Rami Bleckt
Journeys in the Search for the Meaning of Life. A story of those who have found it

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Rami Blekt organized a cycle of seminars for doctors and leaders of medical clinics and hospitals. He is famous for his ability to change fates of many people for the best.

"Journeys in the Search for the Meaning of Life, similar to the journey of thousand miles, begins with a single step only. The first step is very important for understanding the aim of life by each and every person.

The author inspires and encourages all the readers who come the way of Love and realize that we live "here and now". It's true that the main treasurers are universal, moral valuables. If you value everything you have, can express your gratitude to somebody and forgive somebody for something – you'll understand that Love is more than feeling…

Authentic style of the narration impresses the readers of the book greatly. Everybody comes to appreciate the characters' quirks of fate. The ideas expressed in this book are intelligible to everybody and help people to be positive – just positive. I pray it won't be just the words in this book that the readers want to know more dearly but the One who is responsible for them. Thus, the book is of great interest for a wide range of readers. Let it inspires and encourages those who want to start a journey to find the meaning of life."
Best regards, Yelena Astapova, Teacher – methodologist, Trainer for English teachers, an alumna of American and British programs: TEA, CCP, SSEP, ETTE, STA, the author of several methodological books and handouts

"The book gifted a lot of amazing things to me & my acquaintances! If this book was written – life is successful & meaningful, the rest is nothing…"
Elena Belova, Russia

Introduction

This extraordinary story has changed the outlook and lives of many people. It began in the first class cabin of a trans-Atlantic flight. I had boarded and taken my seat beside a man reading a Russian newspaper. I wondered where he had gotten it and just thought to myself, "Well, so he's a Russian speaker, too."

Just before take off, several other people belatedly joined us in first-class. The first had an unusual appearance, unusual in such a way that it was difficult to define what his nationality was. He had a thick head of gray hair, a wise look to him, and faint wrinkles around his eyes – none of which helped to define his age, but he seemed to be over 40. There was an air of calm around him. The second man had a child. The last person to enter was a pretty young woman, brightly dressed and sexy. They all sat not far from me.

The first of these, "the wise man," as I nicknamed him, sat across the aisle from me. The man with the child and the young woman sat across the aisle in the row in front of me. The woman had begun to stow her small bag up top when she arrived and it was clear she expected others to fall over themselves offering to help her. This is frequently the way it occurs with pretty women, spoiled by the attention others lavish on them, accustomed to receiving requests to become acquainted and being offered help for the slightest reason. Yet her bag was so small and light and the personal energy she exuded so repulsive, no one felt the compulsion to help, the more so that she didn't really need it. Her outwardly flirtatious appearance quickly turned into scantly concealed anger and irritation.

Everyone took their seats and the announcement came that we were taking off. The plane taxied down into standby position, where we then had to wait for almost an hour before take off because of a backlog of delayed planes. Even though this doesn't happen often, when it does, it is quite irritating. This time, however, while we sat there waiting, something interesting took place. I was paying attention to "the wise man" in the front row. He asked the stewardess about what time we would be landing, taken our late departure. When she gave him an approximate time, a look of confusion crossed his face for a second. Taking into account about a two-hours delay, it now looked like he would have to stay overnight in Toronto. (On arrival, he was supposed to catch a connecting flight out of the US.)

The interesting thing was that, despite his confusion, he looked peaceful and unperturbed. He glanced at his watch rather calmly, although he was now late for some important meeting or conference, a fact which came out later during a conversation with the young woman. It also became clear that he had no Canadian visa and so he would not be able to leave the airport for hotel accommodations. Too bad; the next flight for him would not be until after lunch time of the next day.

All this he discussed with the flight attendant. Yet throughout it all the man exuded calm. I clearly noticed that, despite the delay, his reaction to it all was devoid of annoyance or pretentious behavior. Later, I learned that these three late passengers had been seriously – and unceremoniously – frisked and detained at the airport and had barely made it to our flight. Yet even this circumstance hadn't fazed his outward calm.

* * *

At the same time, it was interesting to watch the boy. He was five, though at first I had thought eight or ten. He had an unusually intelligent look, wise for a child, and asked his father questions in a loud and insistent way. The father, in contrast, was quite ordinary-looking, rather disheveled and displeased, yet was answering his son in a calm manner.

"Papa, why are we just sitting here?"

"Because the flight is delayed, because other planes have messed up the schedule. Lots of planes are taking off, and lots are landing. The runway is occupied."

"But why? Why did this happen?"

"It just happens sometimes."

"But why did we fly with this plane? We could've left with a different one. Gee, we had two weeks of vacation left and we could've had a great time at Grandma's."

"I have to work."

"Why do we have to work?"

"So that there would be a reason to live and that there will always be something to eat."

"Why live? Why do we live? What's the reason? For you, Papa, what's the reason? Do you know your reason for living?"

Up to this point, the man had answered confidently, but here he faltered.

"Yeah, well, you know… you'll understand when you grow up," he said.

"Oh, come on, Papa. What's the reason? What? Tell me."

At this point, the man started to tell him some general kinds of things, but the child wasn't having it. He would ask again and yet again the same question, bringing the man to the same dead end: "But why?" Why rush forward, why work hard so that you earn something, why fulfill your obligations, why help people, and on and on.

It was rather amusing to observe. And still, once again:

"Papa, so why do we live? What's it all for, what's the reason?"

The boy kept it going on.

"Well, I really don't have a final answer to give, and I think hardly anyone does…"

At this, the boy nearly broke out in tears.

"So… what?! Everyone is living with no purpose, even scholars? Why be born, study, then work, and then get old and die?"

"Maybe there is no meaning…"

At this, "the wise one" spoke up in crystal-clear Russian:

"But why say that? There is a meaning to life."

"Do you really know?" asked the boy's father.

Between them an interesting conversation began. Since they were but an arm's length from me, it was easy to hear.

"Yes, I know the meaning and I have a goal in life," said "the wise one."

He said it so self-assuredly and calmly that I felt he was speaking from clear conviction, imparting faith in his words.

The boy's father asked, "You have, no doubt, found your special purpose in life?" "No, but in my opinion I know the overall reason for people's lives. Moreover, each of us has a special purpose and it is very important that each of us finds it."

At the words 'special purpose', the man and the young woman, perked up. The young woman, it turned out, was also a Russian speaker. I have often noticed that if a woman has that kind of a beauty, she is Slavic.

The man and the boy nearly shouted out in one voice:

"So what is the meaning of life? What is our special purpose?"

"Tell us, tell us," the boy implored, nearly crying.

The man sitting beside me also asked, "Pardon me for interfering, but I'm interested, too. Tell us; I'm sure it will be interesting to everyone. How did you arrive at your conviction, and how do you know that everyone can find his own special purpose?"

"For that, I need to tell you about my whole life, that will take quite some time."

At this, he was earnestly encouraged to continue; after all, there was plenty of time, and everyone would be glad.

Just as the plane finally taxied onto the runway and began accelerating for take off, "the wise one" consented to tell his story, which pleased the passengers greatly. As the plane sped down the runway, he sat back, closed his eyes, and appeared to be concentrating fully. When the plane finally took off, he opened his eyes, attentively looked out the window, and began his story. It all proceeded so smoothly, you could tell that he was completely engrossed in his thoughts.

A spectacular sunset was streaming through the windows. The clouds were adorned with streaks of the setting sun. It was the last day of winter. And for those of us who listened to the story, life now became divided into two parts – before and after this encounter.

"The wise one" spoke quite calmly and thoughtfully, pausing at times for almost a full minute. Including breaks for meals, the story took some five hours.

The stewardesses didn't understand Russian and simply looked on with interest at the company gathered together. No one ordered alcoholic drinks the whole flight; it was clear that they wanted to understand what he was telling them.

Later, after this flight, and with his consent, I met with "the wise man" and recorded this story. In fact, the basis of this story is really a set of recordings by Arthur (the actual name of "the wise man"), which he scrupulously laid down. Later, he gave me copies, asking only that I change the names of the characters in the story.

* * *

Let me briefly tell you about the fellow passengers with whom I later became friends. We each shared our life's stories, after which it was plain, once again, that life is not just a random event and God doesn't bring people together by sheer accident.

The young woman, whom we'll call Natasha, had flown to Canada from Europe to perform as a model in a show. Several shootings had been planned.

She was a successful economist, though this was not evident by looking at her. However, lately she had begun to feel that her life was not fulfilling. She was almost 30 and had achieved more than she had earlier imagined she could: she had graduated with honors from a prestigious institute and gotten a good job. There, they valued her, above all for a financial plan she'd devised which had brought the company success. Yet, out of personal curiosity, she had decided to give the modeling business a try. (She had always understood this to be a dream profession that most girls were willing to make every sacrifice to get into.) A girlfriend from way back in school, now a manager of a large agency, had invited her to give it a try.

Natasha now had an enviable portfolio which attracted the right people. She'd had a successful whirlwind tour of Europe and now this show in Canada. It would seem that she had achieved a dream – money and fame – but with it had come a certain dissatisfaction in life. She sat on the plane and though to herself.

"What's my life for? Why did I go on this trip? Here I am, 30 already, but – what now? Her thoughts were disturbing her. What's my purpose in life? Why was I born? Is everything really without meaning – 'make money and get famous', however you can, as my girlfriends would put it?" The way she saw it, her friends and colleagues paid more attention to playing at life than to finding happiness in it.

* * *

The man sitting to my right, Sergey, also had an interesting story to tell.

He was wondering how the second half of his life was rushing by so much faster than the first half, and the older he got, the more he noticed this. Hardly would one year begin than it would seem the end was already there.

He could only remember a couple bright spots in the current year. It was all like a trip on a super-fast express train, zooming along faster and faster, whereas his childhood had been, as if, on a quiet and slowly moving train. "Why is that? Where is the train rushing off to?" he asked himself, trying to find a logical answer to it all. Yet, the more he tried to sort it out, he only got himself more frustrated. So he tried to find answers from another source, one which had never attracted him before – a spiritual book. He prayed and sincerely asked God for help in understanding this matter. Then he decided just to observe the world around him and wait for a reply.

A few days later, here he was on this flight. He'd found a Russian newspaper which, by chance, had been left in the flap in front of his seat despite the work of the cleaning crew. It was some obscure regional paper from Russia and it was curious how it had gotten on a flight to London.

Sergey couldn't have cared less about that region's news. He didn't even want to read a newspaper. He was intent on finishing a book which he had to give back to a friend upon his return. Yet, the paper attracted his attention. He opened it in the middle, and there he saw a large article comparing child and adult psychology. The article hooked him with its first few lines. It lay out a number of interesting facts.

> *In general, children laugh naturally, openly, about 400 times a day, whereas for adults it's only 10–20 times at most, even if you count grins. Kids can jump into a creative mode – drawing, making clay models, and so on – at the drop of a hat, and enjoy it You can hardly expect to find an adult who would do this without expecting something in return – money, success, fame, etc.*
>
> *Children live, as a rule, consciously, naturally, uninhibited by their emotions. Except for food, attention, and care, a child's complete development needs close emotional contact with both parents.*
>
> *Adults live mechanically, always dreaming of the future and regretting the past, generally never living in the present moment. They slip on various masks, and would hardly be able to answer the question of who they really are. Children are always asking questions and always open to learning new things. The majority of adults have formed their view or vision of the world by age 40. (A survey showed that this occurred at various ages – some while they were still in grade school, some at midlife, and others only at age 80 or so.) Afterward, it is quite difficult to pull yourself off this track, and to some degree, you never do completely. Any event is formulated in terms of their own experience – a mental filter, if you will – through which they see the world and rarely truly ask themselves honest questions about their perceptions and emotions.*
>
> *The article spoke of the importance of raising a child and how current teaching methods are inimical to a child. They are pushed to be result-oriented, made to absorb people's subjective understanding of things (both good and bad), burdened with accepting mediocrity, and are not given practical knowledge. Current pedagogic methods are authoritarian at their core yet completely lack morals and mores. There is no core spiritual base; children are taught a sort of consumer, 'mefirst' approach to life, which is catastrophic for their personality and for society in general. The main goal of modern education is to force-feed a child facts and knowledge, 95 % of which he will never use and, as a result, will quickly forget. The main focus is for the child to pass those all-important tests in math, physics, and so on.*
>
> *A number of famous pedagogues are cited in the article – Makarenko, Suhomlinsky, Amonashvili, Neustryv, and others, not really known to Sergey, but about whom he intended to find out.*

The main idea, without a doubt, was unconditional love. Those who got enough of it in their childhood grew up healthy, holistically, and in time becoming good parents, more capable of realizing their potential.

"And really, at what age would a person ***not*** need this unconditional love?" Sergey chuckled, while reading the article.

The article went on to mention how children often pose deep, philosophical questions. If one answers them in an adult fashion, they make rapid progress. It's worth listening to them; one begins to understand the saying, "Truth comes out of the baby's mouth." Children often ask questions about the meaning of life. It's quite important to answer them in all seriousness, or, if you aren't sure, promise to answer later, for an answer lacking in good formulation may become the only formula they have for their whole life, sometimes with tragic consequences.

How amazing! It was at that very moment of reading the article that he had heard the child asking his father the questions – Why? Why? Why? The father was answering with great difficulty and trepidation. And now the entire group was involved in the question of the meaning of life.

Here Arthur had begun his story; his recollections completely changed Sergey's life. It was like a miracle. He had only just finished an article on this subject and had so very recently asked for God's help in resolving this matter for him.

So, here is the story.

Chapter 1
Youthful Searching and Discoveries

Before Arthur had even learned to read, he posed the very same question as had little Peter, the boy on the airplane. He asked the question again and again. His parents answered him – "When you grow up, you'll understand." As a teenager, he continued to ask the question to intelligent people, considered to be experienced and knowledgeable, yet none of them could tell him why we live.

Oh, sure, he got a bucket load of standard answers: "You'll find out when you get older," "Don't ask stupid questions," "No one knows the answer to that," "To strengthen communism," "To have children," "To live a life of virtue," "To be an example to the generation growing up under you," "To have your name written into history," and so on.

No one could give a concrete, unambiguous answer. He was all the more disappointed that religious leaders were unable to answer it, but also simply gave some general, banal responses. Arthur did not resign himself to this. He intuitively understood that our lives couldn't be meaningless. Even scientific disciplines demanding the most precise measurements recognize that everything has a cause. Assuming, for the sake of argument, that we are merely biomechanisms or chemical substances; nevertheless, we have a reason for which we are born or purpose to fulfill in this world.

* * *

One day, on a trip with friends to the mountains, he went off on his own and climbed to the top of the highest one there. From this vantage point a stunning, enchanting vista was laid out before him. A spectacular panorama for many miles was around him and far off from his camp below he saw a small town. The people were but tiny dots, the buses like miniature match boxes. Their rushing about from way up high seemed an unnecessary and humorous farce, especially considering that it was all being played out in the backdrop of mountains that had seen changing civilizations for many thousands of years.

Questions which had been festering for so long surfaced again quite suddenly: why is there all this hustle and bustle in life? Who created all this beauty? What's the meaning of all it? What's the reason for my life, and is there, in fact, even a reason for it?

The next thing he simply had not expected at all. He dropped to his knees and imploringly beckoned to… well, he didn't really know how to formulate 'to whom'… to some Higher Reasoning Being, to the Creator, who had made all this – all this vastness and beauty. The surroundings and loneliness had naturally induced his communication with Him.

> *"If you exist, help me understand – why do we live, what is the meaning of all it? I don't want to live in the everyday humdrum rat race. I am prepared to devote my life to the attainment of the purpose for which I am meant, to learn the meaning of life, if there is one. Help me; I have no one else to turn to…"*

Having said that, he felt a great satisfaction and joy welling within himself. An unknown bird trilled out a sweet song that underscored his feelings.

As he began to climb back down, the sun dipped behind the hills and, although it was still early yet, it suddenly became dark. This darkness made the descent more difficult than the ascent had been. He almost fell off a cliff after stepping on a stone that slipped aside, but he saved himself by grabbing onto a prickly bush. It took him half an hour, slowly pulling himself inch by inch to steady ground from the looming sheer drop below him, before he could reach safe ground. After that, he was able to reach a plateau, from which a fairly level path led to their camp.

Once he had reached safe ground, his whole body began to shake. He realized that, until then, a sense of 'here and now' had taken over. There had been only the mountains and him – no past, no future. He remembered every moment and every movement. Even after he was finally back down, he was still experiencing what had just taken place. He suddenly remembered that he had passed the graves of several mountain climbers, and this only served to underscore his philosophical state of mind after a near brush with death.

In this state, he joined his friends, who were having a lively discussion about the latest news at school.

He ate, half-heartedly participated a little in the conversation, then crawled into his sleeping bag and stared for the longest time at the stars strewn about in the sky. In the mountains, stars seemed to be larger and to shine brighter and prettier. He remembered that he had read, or someone had told him, that to reach those stars would take many millions of light years, and he felt a sense of internal calm before that great vastness once again.

The more he looked at the stars and contemplated the vastness of it all, the more he felt a deep respect and spiritual presence around him.

His question about the meaning of life had become quite immediate, seeing as how he had almost died.

> *"Why is all this? Why was I born? What is the meaning and purpose of my life? I don't want just to exist; I am ready for anything so that I can learn the meaning of life and to live it," he thought.*

And, drifting off to sleep, it seems he heard a voice, both internally and externally, a voice that spoke resolutely, yet with great love, asking him, "Are you truly ready to dedicate your life to the answer to these questions? Are you ready to go your own path?"

"Yes," he answered confidently.

A certain feeling of bliss in him became yet stronger; it seemed that the lights in the heavens became stronger, too, and they were answering him, "Be well! May your life be full." He looked at the depths of the heavens, but gradually it all became hazy and he fell asleep. Awaking in the morning, he threw himself into the flurry of daily activities and did not pay particular attention to the oath that he had sworn the night before, yet he had the feeling that his 'train of life' had switched to another track and was speeding onto a more interesting, yet more risky path. From that day on, the feeling never left him.

Chapter II
The School of Life Began in School

A few days after they returned, school began. It was their last year in school. There was a new girl now whose father was second-generation Korean. Her name was Lena. There was nothing particularly special about her; she was calm and hard-working. Arthur and Lena became friends. They both loved to read. At Lena's house there were a lot of books and Arthur's place also had its own library. They began borrowing each other's books and would discuss them during breaks. In this way, they came to have a common vocabulary… They read Duma, Stanislavsky, Stankevich, Jack London, Dickens, and many other authors of Russian and world-famous classics.

One day, however, something happened that brought their friendly talks to an end and left a bitter, bitter taste. Many years later they would meet and he would ask for forgiveness; when she granted it he felt a great weight had been lifted from his chest. But in the meantime…

* * *

After lunch one day, Arthur and some friends ended up in the park at the back side of the school – someone was sitting on a bench, someone standing, someone discretely smoking. They were carrying on typical macho guy talk: girls are bad and you just can't trust them, it's better to serve in the army without having a girlfriend, only men can be friends with men, girls are a lower form of life, and so on. In the distance, Arthur saw Lena leaving school. They started making fun of her in loud voices. The first frost had hit and she slipped on the steps and fell several yards apart. She got up with difficulty. Arthur's first impulse was to get up and help her and to stop the guys from jeering, but he didn't do anything; instead he just stood there, laughing, although not so loudly.

Once she got up, she saw that Arthur was part of the group. Even though they were far apart, you could tell that this initially hurt her some more. She then continued walking with great effort, limping painfully and holding her arm bent unnaturally.

She didn't come to school the next day. And only several days later did Arthur resolve to call her. But Lena would either not answer or she would hang up the receiver once she heard his voice. Her mother brought a doctor's note to school stating that she had severely sprained her knee and broken her wrist; in addition, she had gotten a cold while walking home and would not return for at least several weeks. She got a cast on her arm and leg and studied on her own at home.

She returned to school after New Year's break. As for her and Arthur, they basically never talked. Arthur had gone up to her and said, "Oh, come on, let's let it go…" but she gave him a long, hard look and calmly replied,

"You know, it's not important how much we read about honorable deeds, but instead how capable a person is of being a friend, and how honorable we are in our actions in life. Only animals, lowly animals, live by a herd mentality."

To hear 'honorable' cut him like a knife, and in a way it sounded new to him… He was ashamed, although she spoke plainly, without reproach. She spoke of how our character is revealed by our knowledge, our education, and who we truly are. Likewise, we are affected by our dependence on peer pressure and group influence over us, and no one loves traitors and cowards. We should learn to be friends and just good people instead of well-versed, arrogant and cowardly men.

He feigned a writhing pain in his face to try and make a joke of it all, but she left with a sorrowful look on her face. He felt an internal loathing of himself.

In the ensuing months he watched several films, all of which spoke of friendship, virtuous behavior, and honor, and derided cowards and traitors. The book by Kaverin, "Two Captains,"[1] affected him especially deeply.

Arthur finished school but this lesson in life remained with him for a long, long time. From that point on he swore an oath to try and be honorable and never to let anyone down or betray them.

[1] This book won millions of hearts with its sympathetic and incredibly noble heroes.

Chapter III
From Poor Student to Wealthy Entrepreneur

Arthur finished school among the top students, mainly thanks to his parents getting him a tutor. They dreamed of him being accepted into a respected college. He studied earnestly and, with his father's help, he entered a prestigious Moscow institute, what made his parents happy and proud.

His first year was hard but in his second year he was able to find some free time for himself. He started going to various parties with friends but they didn't particularly attract him or give him much pleasure.

The parties mainly revolved around irresponsible thrills – drinking, making low-class jokes, and spending time with some girl or other who was devoid of any moral standards. He'd wake up in the morning with a person who meant nothing to him and what he felt wasn't any personal satisfaction but more a kind of emptiness or dullness in his head. He thought to himself, "Is this really what life is all about?"

Just to get some animalistic sex, he would have to go to the other side of Moscow, breathe cigarette smoke, drink lousy cocktails, listen to dirty jokes, participate in dumb conversations, criticize someone or other, and discuss the latest gossip.

He really preferred to go to the theater and meet interesting people. Many of his fellow students would snicker at him about this, but it didn't bother him.

Likewise, his teachers caused him to think about the meaning of life. After all, they were people assumed, by default, to be leaders; they were expected to know the answers to many questions and to help society prosper.

They got a good salary with benefits at the institute, and it wasn't that hard to get their degrees. That's why many teachers, former students of the institute themselves, had been eager to work there after they finished their studies or, having worked for some time in their fields, they returned to the institute to assume teaching duties. Arthur observed that they were not the happiest of people.

To get on the staff, some of them resorted to ugly tactics: they would spread stories of something bad a colleague had done, scheme against them, and try to use their connections to get a position they wanted.

Over time, they became more bitter and dissatisfied; many began to drink despite their growing salaries and high degrees. Only two teachers differentiated themselves from the rest through their calmness and peacefulness. You could tell that they wanted no part of this "office politics". They came from good families.

One of the older teachers surprised Arthur. He had taught courses on scientific communism and often spoke of morals. At the very start of the perestroika[2] period, however, he left the institute and opened a bar. He sold liquor to students and made a number of shady deals.

Arthur thought about all these things many times and asked teachers about the meaning of life. They told him that the reason for being was to raise oneself in society's standing. "We should become socially successful individuals, accomplished professionally, becoming, for instance, engineers, officers, doctors, leaders…"

This was nothing new to him; they had said the same stuff in school. "All right," he thought, "So I devote from 20 to 30 years of my life to be a professor. And that's all? That's the meaning of life?

Once, however, Arthur was at a reception for a well-known artist who had attained everything he had dreamed of in his career – fame, fortune, devotees. Yet the artist himself admitted that he was

[2] Perestroika, literally 'rebuilding', was the period during which the Soviet Union changed its economy to a capitalist-style open market.

feeling less and less happy about life, although he led an exciting lifestyle and increasingly received awards and gained new admirers. This all forced Arthur to consider and reconsider his future. At any rate, he knew that it was important for him to graduate, but then after that he would make a cardinal change in his life.

While still a schoolboy, Arthur knew that physical health was a requirement in life – without it you could neither attain much nor would you really enjoy it. He understood that you had to pay attention to your body. He was glad to do it: he actively played several sport games, hiked in summer, practiced bodybuilding and had a strong, tight body.

* * *

Just before Arthur graduated in the late 1980s, perestroika had begun.

In his last year, he read Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelag. He saw the internal rot of the system which had inflicted its deceit, lies, and forced on tens of millions of people. He had no desire to work for the government, although he was offered work there, work which would've given him the opportunity to travel abroad regularly, a rare and special perk in those days. He readily rejected a number of tempting offers, some of which came as a result of his parents' connections and others which came as a 'package deal' from families offering a daughter. For months he had gotten a series of invitations from very influential people who offered him to get to know and marry their daughters. It turns out he was quite the promising bachelor: he neither drank nor smoked and his education promised an excellent career.

One well-connected man put it like this, "Look, as a wedding present I'll give you a new GAZ-24 car and keys to your own condo and I'll help you get ahead in your career." But he refused all the tempting offers and preferred to get his diploma free of any ties that would obligate him after graduation.

He passed his exams quite well, graduating with honors. He stayed in the dorm for several months afterward because he had injured his knee in sports.

Those days the first manifestations of freedom of speech appeared – television and newspapers didn't have communist slogans. Privately-owned stores and restaurants arrived, ushering in a new milestone in the economy.

One day at lunch in the institute's cafeteria, he met a man named Orlovsky. He offered Arthur a job taking care of certain boxes he would bring to him. "Hey, you can't walk anyway yet. May as well get paid for doing something," he told Arthur with a wink.

His last name of Orlovsky certainly fit him well – he looked like an eagle.[3] Although his name had Slavic origins, his ethnic origins were Jewish, a fact he did not try to hide.

When asked what he did for a living, he would say he was an 'entrepreneur' or 'businessman. Orlovsky's business within the institute was procurement of various types of commercial-grade equipment.

A month later, they once again met in the institute's cafe, started talking, and became friends. Orlovsky had remembered Arthur to be honest and responsible and offered him a job working with him for good money. The work was rather interesting and they travelled a lot. The essence of the job was first to buy something, and then to sell that 'something'. Entrepreneurial blood coursed in Orlovsky's veins; he knew what would be useful to buy or sell and from whom to whom.

He opened several underground shops, among which was one that made underwear. They were successful in selling their products and made a good profit at it. On top of his salary, with every sale Arthur got a good commission and within a year he had become very rich. He could easily make in

[3] Orlovsky, or Orlov, comes from the Russian word 'oryel', which means 'eagle'.

a week what the institute's director made in a year. And he didn't have to go to any party meetings or participate in dirty office politics.

He bought himself a new Zhiguli car, a large, well-appointed condo in Moscow, and also one for his parents, plus, their lifelong dream – a weekend cabin.

And so it was natural that in one of their business trips, when joint ventures were just in their inception, he asked Orlovsky what this busy life was for. Orlovsky told him, "You can achieve some title or place in society, but if you don't have money, there's no point. If you have money, you can do what you want and own what you want." In this way, Orlovsky planted the seed in Arthur to have "money for money's sake."

Arthur decided to work a year for Orlovsky and then go his own way. He had gotten everything he wanted and he could take a vacation wherever he wanted. This was pretty much anyone's dream, yet still, he wanted more and more. He dived in deeper to this 'whirlpool of life', where money was the main goal, and from which it was not all that easy to get out. But in a year and a half something happened that sharply changed his life and the lives of all those connected to their business.

* * *

One night, he and Orlovsky got out of their car to have dinner. In front of them a new Mercedes and a new Russian car stopped and a couple of large guys got out. They grabbed Orlovsky by the neck and pounded him a few times against the wall.

They assumed Arthur was his driver and just told him that if he moved, they would cut him up into pieces and drop him onto the wet asphalt. Their faces didn't portend anything good. They began to ask Orlovsky why he hadn't given them any money. It wasn't dark yet and people were walking around, but no one dared to help or even call the police.

The guys threatened to Orlovsky and his family. They promised to damage him if he didn't give them a large sum of money. Arthur got frightened. Where would they get money? The guys left. Orlovsky was shaking in fear. He couldn't eat in the restaurant and he said in a trembling voice that he had his own local 'mob' guys for protection.

The next day, however, a bunch of other even bigger men showed up, many from the North Caucasus, and they demanded all his money and property. Orlovsky told Arthur that they would no longer be able to work together, that he should stay away from him, and he would have to quit the business and give the money to these hoodlums, otherwise things would end badly.

Arthur learned later that after a few days passed these hoods had grabbed Orlovsky's daughters on the way home from school, forced them into the car, scared them and told them to tell their father that the next time they would tie them up, torture them, and if they lived, return them to their father. Scared beyond belief, the daughters returned home and told their mother. Orlovsky's wife demanded that he would give them all their money.

Orlovsky sold everything he could, including his two large apartments but still couldn't raise the needed $5,000. Arthur gave him the money he needed, which surprised Orlovsky (those days you could've bought a large apartment or five to ten used cars with it). Then Orlovsky disappeared from his life. He heard rumors that he had immigrated to Israel and then to Western Europe, where he suffered from a serious heart attack.

* * *

Arthur took everything into consideration but he was sad to have let the elderly employees go, realizing quite well that they would hardly be able to find a new employer paying as well as Orlovsky did.

And then the ruble took an unexpected dive. Since Arthur's money was all invested in his apartment and car, and he had a few thousand dollars in cash, he lost very little. He was able to trade his two-bedroom apartment for two smaller ones. He lived in one and rented the other out. The money from the rental was enough to live on, plus he had that cash supply as a reserve. He also sold a few gold items he had purchased while working for Orlovsky.

And so, once again that question – what good is all this commotion in life?

He still had connections in business and he knew what activity would bring the most profit but he wasn't so anxious to throw himself into a new 'whirlpool'. What was most interesting – he had lost his infatuation with money. It wasn't fear; rather, he realized that you could earn money your whole life yet lose it all in a flash. Criminals, economic crisis, etc. – he had seen firsthand how some people lost in a day what had taken them a lifetime to earn. All that money lost its value; their lifelong labor had been for naught financially. What was interesting to note – the more money a person lost, the more he suffered.

He thought to himself, "Even if there was a completely secure bank, even if I could make myself a fortune and have everything I wanted, would that really constitute a purpose in life?"

A month after Orlovsky's disappearance something else happened again to affect Arthur's approach to life.

Chapter IV
A Message from "The Other World"

After a week in the hospital, Arthur's father died of a heart attack. Arthur had already gone to see him as soon as he heard of his admittance to the hospital. His father had suffered from asthma all through his life and this last winter's bouts with pneumonia had greatly exacerbated the situation.

The doctors said he needed certain expensive medicine, for which Arthur paid immediately. Nevertheless, the doctors' prognosis was that, even if he lived, he would be an invalid. During that time Arthur and his father spoke more – and more from the heart – than they ever had.

After his father got out of intensive care and Arthur visited him, his father told him that he had been clinically dead for a short period. He had had an out-of-body experience during which he went through a tunnel and then saw himself and the operating table. It seemed as if he had met with deceased relatives who told him, "Give your son some advice and return to us." His father also told him that he had seen a light, full of love, which is virtually impossible to feel while on Earth. Even barely touching it gave you a feeling of peace and joy. But Arthur didn't lay much value on what his father said because he felt he was still delirious.

After Arthur left the hospital, he saw a stand with books and magazines and he decided to buy something to kill the time at the hotel. The first thing he saw was a book by Moody, 'Life After Life'. By morning, he had finished reading it and was going to visit his father, imbued with a good feeling he had gotten from the book.

In the book, a doctor and a scientist took a reasoned approach to what was reported by a great number of people who had come back after being clinically dead. They proceeded on the assumption that those people couldn't all have simply made up their stories. Basically, people were saying the same thing that Arthur's father had told him. What amazed and gladdened him was that the soul does not end when the physical body does.

When Arthur visited his father the second time, his father told him his life story and asked for his forgiveness. It was important for Arthur to hear this; ever since childhood he had always felt that his father didn't love him. But his father told him that he had worked hard to make him better, to get him a better education, and to give him a moral upbringing. Yes, he had been strict with his son because he knew how swiftly bad influences can change a young adult.

His father asked forgiveness for having hit him a few times in his childhood. Arthur knew that his father's strictness had pushed him to be better, had helped him to become a person at all. Raising his son had been his father's purpose in life. "A worthy goal, all things said and done," Arthur thought to himself. "If I have kids, I'll try to give them a better life, too." They held each other in their arms and asked for one another's absolution.

The third visit with his father shook him to his core, and that's why he wrote down in his diary what he could remember after he got back to his hotel room.

* * *

… When I arrived at his room, doctors were running around with grave concern on their faces. His father had apparently begun gasping for air that night and they had barely saved him. His situation had been almost hopeless, the supervising doctor told him.

Arthur's father was pale yet peaceful. He saw me enter and started talking to me:

*"I was… **there…** again. It is hard there for those who have lived an unworthy life, which is the majority. But what's most amazing is that there they have a whole other understanding of good and evil. Many people considered to be good here are severely punished there, and vice versa. People's main*

concern about going there should be that we will be judged – Did you act from the heart, from the soul, or merely from your ego?

The main sin is egotism. We live in such ignorance; such a shame for people that we don't have the right values. So few people follow the path meant for them. You see, it turns out that following someone else's path is a grievous sin."

"Dad, how do you feel? Can I bring you something?" "Nothing, I'm all right. I don't have much time left anyway."

"Come on, Dad, stop it. Everything's going to be all right."

"But why do you think that death at its rightful time is bad? After all, death is just a passage to another state of being, another form of life. Imagine traveling to another country and everything there is new, but lots of souls there are familiar to you.

"What!?" Arthur asked, incredulous.

"My life flashed in front of me for a few seconds. Amazing! It's too bad that I worked so much and spent so little time with you or with friends; too bad that I took so little time off and practically never worked on developing my inner soul. In the end, you see, that is the reason we have come to this world."

"But, Dad, we went to the theater, to exhibitions. Remember how you sometimes forced me to go to some cultural events?"

"Those don't develop your soul; a lot of those artists will suffer for having led people astray, and they will suffer more than others. True culture should draw people to God, my son.

"So, Dad, you mean it's better just to go out on the town and get drunk in a bar?"

"That's even worse."

"Dad, this all sounds so gloomy."

"Have you been in a theater or a bar recently? See? You can do without it."

"I just don't seem to have the time, but if there's a good play or film then I would definitely go to see it. Is that really bad?"

"A good one, hmmm? There are less and less 'good' films or plays."

"But Dad, why can't we believe that you'll get well and you'll live right and you can help people live that way?"

"No, I have just been holding on to say goodbye and to ask you to forgive me one more time for everything, and to ask you to deal with unresolved obligations I'm leaving behind. You see, you're not supposed to die with indebtedness. If I had only known this all before, I would have undertaken to teach it to others."

"What would you have taught? Like going to the theater is bad?"

"No, that we have all come here to develop our souls. Egotism is the cause of our ills and the reason we don't focus our lives around love. My son, this is the work you must do."

"Maybe that is not my special purpose in life. You said everyone had his own path to take."

"This activity, developing your inner soul, is higher than any purpose an individual may have. It's the main purpose of every living being. Though our lives are short, we can achieve very much."

I didn't know what to say, much less to do.

My father was so concerned about his debts: return a book to someone, 2,000 rubles to a neighbor… He asked a priest to come and read him his last rites and for Arthur to give as an offering whatever remuneration he would name (very unusual for those times).

At three in the afternoon, his father began to look attentively at an icon which hung above the entrance to his room (Some elderly women had recently hung them in rooms of the critically ill.). He repeated something to himself a few times and in about a quarter hour he took a deep breath and left us. 'Left' was the right word, Arthur knew, not died; he could feel it. A sense of peace accompanied his father's passing; a pleasant smile was left on his face.

In a kind of daze, Arthur reminded himself of his duties: funeral, priest, reparation of debts, returning to Moscow.

* * *

Arthur's mother had been visiting her parents in the Far East. They had not been able to get through to her until a raging thunderstorm there had finally settled down and so she hadn't been able to return until a few days after the funeral.

She had a lot of friends and relatives in the city who gave her their support. A year and a half later she married a great guy and, with every passing year, Arthur talked with her less and less. Somewhere he remembered reading that the greater the love was between spouses, the sooner they were able to find new partners. Ties to his relatives now held him less than ever from the life which he wanted to lead.

This event with his father forced Arthur to reflect. His father had been relatively young (under 50) yet nevertheless, suddenly – he had gone. The question of the meaning of life arose again. "After all, everything is temporal," he thought. "You can't make sense out of the continuing fuss and bustle of life." What's more, he started to be afraid of death. He understood that he would die one day, too, and maybe he only had one, two, or three years. Nobody knows.

A few months before, a young man, his neighbor, was hit by a car, and he died on the spot. And now, Arthur's father, who had been so young. He used to think he would die when he was from 80 to 100, but now he realized that it could be considerably earlier. He felt acutely aware of his questions about the meaning of life.

After his father's funeral, he read books for a few weeks, walked around alone in natural areas. He didn't know at the time that each day was bringing him closer to a meeting which would categorically change his life. His father's words before his death, the book about some supposed life after death – these had a strong influence on him. But he just wasn't getting a unified, complete picture of what the world was and he had now lost all interest in it.

One day a friend from his student days called and invited him to live at their weekend home. His parents were travelling abroad and they needed someone to house-sit – water the plants and so on. Arthur agreed. He wanted to be alone. It had been a month since his father's death. He drove over to his friend's place to get the keys and the next morning he was ready to go.

Chapter V
An Encounter with Zheka, the 'Holy Father'

The next day, Arthur left his apartment early to buy groceries and deal with some things. Hardly had he gotten out the door when he heard the church bells ringing. At the beginning of the 90s, this was a new, unusual occurrence in Moscow, one to which Muscovites hadn't quite adjusted. He remembered that not far from him was a church that was opened a few years ago, and which now had a large, active membership.

Apparently there was some kind of festival – the closer Arthur got, the larger the crowd of people. Someone was coming out of the church towards him. Several women wore long dresses and scarves which surprised him a bit.

He didn't have any particular attitude about church in general. He would sometimes go in, place a candle, and stay for some of the service. As a child, his great-grandmother had him baptized and she would talk a lot about the orthodox faith. Once in the past he had gone there to pay respects to her. He heard an elderly woman loudly complaining and scolding other people, adding to the gloomy atmosphere hanging over everyone's head, spoiling the impression of his visit. He didn't want to go there ever again.

Various articles in newspapers described how there were virtually no priests who hadn't been connected to Soviet power and not worked for the KGB. That, together with The Gulag Archipelag, had put a nail in the coffin for his belief in them and the church.

* * *

He was just walking, enjoying the beautiful sunny day and the birds' singing. To his surprise, he saw a priest coming his way, rather young, bearded, with long hair, looking fixedly at him. He felt ill at ease from the stare. He tried to avert his glance and sped up his step, but all of a sudden he heard the man calling him by name, "Arthur! Arthur!"

He hadn't imagined that the priest would call him by name. But when he heard him say in a singsong way, "Oh, Art," he knew the man was calling him. He had often been called 'Art' in his first years at the institute. Almost everybody had a nickname of sorts. Arthur stopped; without a doubt he was being addressed. The priest, smiling broadly and warmly, asked him, "Art, don't you recognize me?" And then, all at once he remembered, as if someone had thrown him in a cold shower.

"Zheka?" Arthur asked.

That had been our nickname for Eugene. Zheka came from the Vologda region. His father had been a manager of a large firm there and he had done everything he could to get his son into an institute of higher education in the capital. But his son wasn't very studious and was expelled for fighting and drinking in his second semester. He hadn't left a good impression of himself. Even worse, he was suspected of petty theft among his fellow students, and that had been the lowest thing to do. He wasn't caught in the act, but twice while he had been posted for security duty in the dorm some money and valuables disappeared. They weren't able to prove anything but there hadn't been anyone else on that floor.

All in all, Arthur couldn't call to mind any good impressions he had of Zheka. Looking at him now and trying to smile in return, he felt perturbed and thought to himself, "Good God! If these are the kinds of people that have now entered the church…"

For a fraction of a second, images of the past came to mind. He hesitated, not wanting to have anything to do with this 'holy father', as he was mentally calling Zheka.

They exchanged pleasantries and Arthur asked, "So, how can I call you? Father Eugene, most likely?"

"Oh, come on, stop it," Eugene good-naturedly objected. "Not really, but that doesn't matter right now. I'm just glad to see you. I understand what you are thinking. I'm sure you don't have any good memories of me. I can imagine. Still, I'm glad to see you. If you'd like, we can talk. You know, I'm indebted to you. Once at a lecture you raised a very important question about the meaning of life. Your argument with the teacher deeply influenced me. It had come to my mind again when I was under fire."

Arthur didn't pick up on Zheka's 'under fire' comment. But he did remember bringing up important questions about life and arguing at lectures on philosophical points until the group's party youth leader hinted to him that if he wanted to graduate, he had better stop doing it.

It was uncomfortable to refuse a bit of conversation, but he really didn't want any. Yet something inside of him told him to agree. So, mostly out of politeness, he said, "Sure." They went into a cafe that had recently just opened and sat at a table outside. Arthur gave a quick synopsis of himself – "Ahh, you know, nothing interesting," – and then asked Zheka to tell him about his 'religious transformation. He began talking and Arthur pretended that he was listening, but all the time he was thinking about the end of this chit-chat with the 'holy father'. They ordered some deserts and Zheka, in his quaint Vologda accent, told his story.

The more he talked, the more intriguing he sounded. They spent about three hours talking. Arthur, after coming back home, again returned to his diary to write down (as faithfully as he could recall) what he had heard. He wanted to show it to his future children.

* * *

Zheka explained that he was in Moscow only for a few days and was just passing through. He served in a small parish where there were not enough clergy. The parish membership was increasing and many new churches were opening.

He had come here for church celebrations, meetings, and training. He had a fiancée – a god-fearing, honest, and faithful young woman.

After he was expelled from the institute, his resume, showing his education and work, were very poor. His own father didn't even want to help him, saying, "Go on now; serve in the army. I served; now it's your turn. So, you didn't want to study? The army will help you to learn." And even though his father could've bought his son a way out of serving at all, or set him up in a comfy job somewhere, he did nothing of the sort. He had pretty much soured on his son.

The Spring recruitment round[4] called up Zheka to serve. After his physical test, the Lieutenant-Colonel went up to Zheka and roughly addressed him, "So, you like to fight. You're a hot number, huh? What I'll tell you: let's just send you somewhere you'll get enough fighting and make good use of your talent. Do you want to be in the paratroopers? Not afraid?"

"No."

"Well, then, happy trails and God bless."

He was sent to join the Fergana paratrooper regiment in Turkistan. While they were on the train a few days later, they found out that most likely they would be sent to Afghanistan. In Fergana there was a boot camp and a regiment on active duty in Afghanistan.

Zheka had a terrible feeling about it all because – both in his home town as well as in Moscow – he knew a lot of people who had been wounded or killed, or who had lost someone in Afghanistan.

Newspapers weren't saying much about it, or if they did, they wrote articles of glory, and only people who could read between the lines in Soviet papers understood how badly things were going.

[4] The USSR held a draft into mandatory service in their armed forces twice a year.

Chapter VI
Afghanistan

What awaited him in Fergana was an intensive boot camp,[5] where soldiers trained, studied, and prepared for about three months before being sent to Afghanistan. It was no way out of it; it was tough, not least because of the strict boot-camp instructors. Their sergeants meted out severe punishment for the slightest infraction. Soldiers and sergeants called the officers jackals because of their even higher demands. Yet their grueling discipline was fairly justified since all officers and sergeants had gone through many field operations in actual battle. They would fly in for new recruits to refresh their ranks. They knew what would wait these greenhorns.

They were trained in firearms, hand-to-hand combat, parachute jumping, a number of desert combat scenarios, and went through extreme physical training. Then they were sent for a few weeks to the mountains, where Zheka thought he would die from exhaustion. Sometimes they would hike for 20–30 km. in full battle gear while still carrying on various battle engagement scenarios and shooting practice. His feet ended up looking like one big callus of blood and pus however he would try to wind socks around them. They got a half canteen of water a day.

But the real hell and torture began three months later when they were sent to Afghanistan.

* * *

Arthur's notes didn't contain the exact names of all the cities or people. The only ones written down were Kabul, Kandahar, Zelenka, and most of all – Bagram. On the one hand, it was easier in Afghanistan because there weren't any combat drills pulled on them in the middle of the night. On the other hand, there was continual psychological tension combined with a backdrop of steady, heavy physical labor.

The first two months they were stationed at a large base. Their part of the camp was fired on from the neighboring mountains in the first week and two from the first company died and several were injured. This was their baptism by fire and he understood – it was no joke.

Zheka began praying to God with the first shots: "God protect me. Save me if you are there!" He had not expected this to be coming from him of all people. After all, he had only heard of God from his old grandmother, way back in his childhood. She hadn't really told him a lot, just general sorts of things – how to pray, to cross your heart, and who Jesus Christ was.

Few months later, he got severe intestinal pains and after a couple days in the hospital, he was sent to another battalion whose duty was to maintain security over a remote region. They had to hold several high ridges in their hands, guarantee the security of various convoys, and carry out reconnaissance raids.

These were tough times in every way. Even though it was fall, it was hot and dry and it became windier every day. In November, strong sand storms kicked in and the nights became colder and colder. But the hardest thing to get used to was the heavy losses to the Soviet army. Death, injury, and missing in action were commonplace.

The mujahedeen were getting more experienced, trained by American mercenaries who provided them the most modern weapons. 'Stingers' were the most dangerous – they easily shot down helicopters. Shooting on convoys or laying down punitive fire on the paratroopers' motorized brigades was now the norm, using American and captured Soviet rockets.

[5] The Course for Young Soldiers – CYS

The hardest thing to take was that everyone understood the senselessness of the fighting and that the so-called 'international aid' was not what this country needed.

Planes returned to the USSR full of wounded or with 'load 200 , as the zinc caskets were called. When there wasn't room, the caskets sat under the hot sun for some time before take off.

Many soldiers in this battalion who had been on repeated tours of duty with only a month left to serve did whatever they could to be able to return home alive and in one piece. It was considered to be the worst thing to have served two years in this hell and to be injured or killed just before being sent home.

For the battalion, the last year was the hardest of the whole Afghan campaign. About half of them either died or were wounded and those that survived suffered from infections. As a result, a lot of new soldiers and officers were brought in who mostly hadn't seen battle yet.

Zheka had a year and a half left to serve. It seemed to last an eternity, as every day for him stretched out painfully and despairingly. As if things weren't bad enough, he fell asleep on sentry duty one night, which had extremely unpleasant consequences. The battalion's guard cussed him out roundly, and after he was dismissed, the sergeant gave him a professional knockout punch, telling him, "Because of people like you, whole companies get cut to pieces." In the morning the battalion commander roared at him, "So, you like to sleep on guard duty? We'll pack you off to Parkhomin's unit. You won't fall asleep there."

And so he was sent to join a hard-core marine unit under the command of Parkhomin. This lone platoon carried out the most difficult assignments and was always engaged in battle.

* * *

It was not hard for Zheka to remember meeting with the platoon commander – his demeanor lent itself to ready friendship. The lieutenant was sitting on his bed, reading the arrival papers of a new soldier to his command. He said in a warm, fatherly tone, "We're so glad you're here. Tell me something about yourself." That fatherly manner just about did Zheka in; he almost cried. No one had talked to him in that way for so long. His own father had been quite brusque with him when he sent him off to the army.

Zheka told him about himself, Parkhomin showed him where the mess hall was, and left him with some parting words: "Strive to serve well. We all depend on one another here and your little mistake could cost many their lives – your fellow soldiers and those we are trying to protect." He then gave him some important manuals and sent him off to sergeant Zubin.

And so began new battle routines for Zheka. They would get an emergency call, for example – a convoy had been ambushed so it would be their duty to fly out there. They would pull dead and wounded from the ambush site, lie waiting for several days in case the mujahedeen returned, accompany the rescue vehicles back to the hospital, and a number of similar tasks. By the end of spring, he had turned into a seasoned fighter.

He was a good shot, could easily go on 20-kilometer mountain marches fully suited up, quickly found the safest places to be during an engagement, could move silently, and could take his sleep in 30-minute sessions. He took life as it came – day by day.

All this time in the platoon no men were lost, which was surprising because losses in the battalion as a whole continued. Much of this was due to their platoon commander, who, in addition to his valuable experience, also had a certain 6-th sense, an intuition which saved the soldiers on numerous occasions.

* * *

One time they were returning to base after a two-day march, totally exhausted. They were about six kilometers out and intent on getting back before sunset. The path stretched out downwards and the lead men were jogging ahead because they wanted to eat, drink, and rest before morning. This area was considered to be safe territory – their own. But suddenly Parkhomin shouted, "Hold it! Don't move." He moved ahead slowly with a sapper.[6] And literally in ten meters they discovered a trigger-wire, a string attached to a bomb. If they had pulled on this string, a grenade would've rolled down and in a few seconds exploded. This had been calculated to be for a group heading down a narrow path. There was no time to defuse it, especially since another trigger-wire was found. He gave the command, "Walk around it, carefully."

They took up positions on high ground and noticed some mujahedeen getting settled on a neighboring ridgeline to shoot down on a convoy which they could already see below. The shooting started and the commander led the operation from cover. Suddenly he called to the machine-gunner on the radio, "Get out of your spot now! Leave your position immediately. Go 30 meters to the ravine. Fast! And cover your head!" In a minute you could hear a rocket-propelled grenade and it exploding right where they had just been. Even though they were a bit deafened by the blast, everyone lived. And this was far from the only such instance.

He also had a certain 'sense' about people. He always seemed to know who to send where and for what. He had chosen Saulyus, a Lithuanian, as radio operator, even though Russian was not his mother tongue and he spoke with a strong accent. A couple of sergeants had considered the matter once during a cigarette break: "So, will this Lithuanian be able to speak Russian while we're under fire? You know, what if he forgets how to speak Russian?" Once, they had been coming down from a mountain with him and some shooting erupted. Saulyus fell down, sprained his foot, and rolled down the hill, accidentally hitting the walkie-talkie a few times on rocks and it stopped working. Mujahedeen were trying to surround them and they urgently needed to call for help. But he sat down, started fixing the radio, kept a cool head, and in five minutes he had it working again. They called for help and two helicopters arrived, laying down fire on the encroaching mujahedeen. The artillery joined in, hitting the mujahedeen positions on the ridge from which they'd been firing. The attackers had to withdraw. One soldier was wounded, though not serious – some stray shrapnel – and he returned to duty in a few days.

Parkhomin was an officer that even soldiers from other divisions respected and would not refer to as a jackal, as they did to other officers. He could be harsh and demanding, but he was courageous and always saw to the needs of his own men.

For instance, he might call the regiment's administrative chief and demand replacement of expired soldering rods or a shipment of more foodstuffs. He might speak roughly, too, even though the person at the other end of the line was a major. He would do whatever it took to get the best for his men.

A lance corporal had been seriously injured (before Zheka had joined) and was sent back to the base hospital. Shrapnel had caused severe lesions in his right thigh. The shrapnel there hadn't reached the bone but gotten close to the knee and was touching the tendon. Other shrapnel had hit him in the side in his ribs. The corporal's name was Andrey Velichko. He lay in the hospital several weeks before his transport back to the Soviet Union, and Parkhomin, when he was on base, brought him his mail, his things, food. He gave him words of support and encouragement and thanked him for his service. His care meant exuded concern and support, and everyone felt it.

[6] A sapper is a mine-clearing engineer

But Zheka felt this man's courage was his most striking aspect. He was lecturing two Dagestan soldiers who had been placed to hold a vital position – covering troop disembarkation. They had left their posts abruptly while under fire, giving the attackers the opportunity to fire on the whole group. Everyone lay down as the helicopter, which hadn't dropped off the whole contingent, took back off again. It was just a miracle that no one was hurt. When they got back to the barracks, Parkhomin hollered at them: "You pigs! Scum! Lowlifes! Cowards! I'm going to write to your whole family, so that your grandparents and parents know that they have raised cowards. He cussed them out unreservedly and said that next time, if someone dies, they will have to write the words for the soldiers' last rites and explain to their parents in their own broken Russian, "I am so sorry, mothers, I chickened out and ran, and they killed your son…"

This went on for some ten minutes after which he said that such low-lives would even ruin administrative or support operations. They tried to say something in their defense; their nostrils were flaring. They were from the Caucasus, hot-blooded, not used to anyone daring to address them in this fashion.

They were ordered for a month, every time after returning from maneuvers, to bring in all additional ammunition and to clean the latrines. The behavior they had shown couldn't, in principle, be permitted. The mujahedeen were a big enough problem to deal with. But now, you might have to worry if your own people were going to shoot at you – whether in the foot or the body – because you had been too harsh. Just knowing that the people covering your back hate you increases your psychological stress, and that was already at a high enough level.

To their honor, these soldiers never again exhibited their cowardice.

* * *

At the end of spring, Parkhomin took a month's leave. During that time, their unit was largely left alone. They only went on two big jobs and even then, they were attached to the whole recon company. Zheka noticed how everyone was feeling a little off, missing something or someone. They were all missing their officer.

Parkhomin returned from leave refreshed and enthused, but at the same time sad and self-reflective. While he had been on leave, an order had come through promoting him to captain.

He had a two-year old son and a wife whom he hadn't seen a year because his leave was always getting delayed. No one was available to replace him while he was gone, a problem that often occurred in the outlying areas in Afghanistan.

His parents had died in a car accident when he was in his last year of high school. That was one of the reasons why he chose a military academy to study at: the government paid for room and board. He graduated from a school specializing in English with good grades and was easily entered a military academy.

He had only six or seven months left to serve out in Afghanistan.

About the end of August some extremely serious fighting began. The mujahedeen were actively engaging them daily through arms fire and bombings. Hard times were setting in. Again, they heard rumors that they would be sent back to the Soviet Union.

Instead, they remained and continued to suffer greater and greater losses, and their battalion was no exception, however Parkhomin worked hard to protect them. Approximately two months after he'd come back from leave, they were sent in a paratrooper armored troop transport to rescue a scout unit.

All of a sudden, a town on the other side of the canyon was laying down heavy machine-gun and rocket-propelled grenade fire. There was supposed to be a local Afghan (Soviet-aligned) army garrison there.

The mujahedeen used a very dirty tactic, especially in the last years. They would enter local residents' homes, set up battle positions, and shoot. The residents weren't permitted to leave. And

so, when return fire came, many civilians died. The mujahedeen would photograph this and use it as propaganda against the Soviet Army. It also helped them win new recruits anxious to avenge the deaths of relatives.

The Soviet soldiers who had been sent to help had gotten pinned down – some behind a tank, some behind various stones – and could hardly move. One tank finally blew up under the intensity of the large-caliber machine-gun fire and from the rocket-propelled grenades.

They had called for assistance on the radio. Now, on the other side of the gorge, the helicopters were dropping off the paratroopers. They were encircling the town and beginning to fight back, aided by volleys from helicopters. Two of the tanks were shooting with their 30-mm guns. Virtually all the Soviet soldiers were actively shooting at the mujahedeen, whose fire had diminished.

Parkhomin's troops began to fire back with their rocket-propelled grenades and were steadily eroding the mujahedeen positions.

This was a fairly dangerous, well-armed contingent; you could call it a mujahedeen 'special forces unit' that had trained in Pakistan.

In the end, the division coming down from above took the village by nightfall. No one got away – two wounded mujahedeen were taken alive and sixteen killed. Unfortunately, several families of the local civilians died.

Parkhomin said, "What can we do about it? They chose to bring their people to death. If their religion, their world view lets them use their people as a living shield, what can we do?"

Their regiment's commander implemented a new tactic – shoot to kill even if the shooting came from residential homes. Before, only snipers had been allowed to do this. This new method saved countless paratroopers' lives but increased the civilian deaths. Of course, soon this worsened relations with the local population.

It was a bad scene – many dead and wounded, especially among our intervening forces.

In their platoon, six had died, among them Sergeant Zubin, who'd had so little time left to serve out and who had rescued wounded during the engagement, dragging them behind boulders. At the end of the battle, a dazed engineer had jumped out of a burning tank and Zubin covered him with his body. He received a posthumous Order of Glory. His mother and a girlfriend, whom he had loved from school days, were left to live without him in Leningrad.[7] He had studied with his girlfriend at the Polytechnic Institute and they had planned to marry. Later, when Parkhomin spoke of him, he said that only such a man, who could love truly, could honestly be called a hero.

Ten were wounded, virtually all seriously. Their radio operator, Saulyus, had lost his leg below the knee. He groaned and came in and out of consciousness. There was only one doctor, trying to help everyone. Helicopters started arriving, receiving the dead and wounded. In the half-collapsed mosque they found a large cache of weapons, mines, and books.

Zheka had earlier prayed to God, asking for his protection, but this time he turned to Him with despairing questions: "Why? Why do the innocent suffer? Why do the young become cripples? What is this useless war for? What did these good men do that displeased God so? Why are the mujahedeen become crueler the more religious they get? Tell me God, why is it happening? What good is our suffering to you? Why am I here, and Saulyus, and Zubin? I wasn't wounded but these good men, who have loving young women, and parents, and who studied well, were. I want to know – why? And, I want to do something so that it will never happen again."

They returned to base. Morale was low; everyone was despondent. They were given two days off to recuperate. There were 15 new soldiers, straight from boot camp, coming in as replacements. The second lieutenant brought some hard liquor to drink in memory of those fallen, and everyone drank except Parkhomin. He never drank or smoked and didn't encourage it. Bad habits make a

[7] Now called St. Petersburg

person a slave and weak in every way, he was sure. But this time he didn't bother them about it; he was very busy and hardly ever left his quarters.

Two days later they received another assignment – establish a position at a high elevation and report on all enemy activity, trying not to engage them. They headed to a deserted village and took up positions. Already the next night some mujahedeen tried to enter the village. When they got close enough, they were shot. Two were killed but a third managed to escape. It was clear it had been a scouting operation and now the mujahedeen knew where they were.

And in fact, early the next morning they were back, shooting. This turned into a grim battle. Parkhomin took Zheka, two other experienced men, and the radio operator into an empty house standing a bit higher than the rest apart. This afforded the best vantage point from which to see the attacking mujahedeen and coordinate battle orders.

Parkhomin ordered them to hold their positions, to conserve their rounds, and only to shoot when they were sure. They were told that reinforcements would arrive, but hours went by and – nothing. As it turned out, that morning two helicopters had been shot down and an entire convoy destroyed. So now, the soldiers were shooting back as best they could, yet, slowly but surely, they became encircled.

The mujahedeen made subtle advances under cover of continual machine gun fire, making the fight very challenging. It was clear that they were seasoned fighters.

The village's houses had virtually no roofs and one mujahedeen who had been able to creep up closely enough undetected was able to throw a grenade in.

As Zheka was telling this part of his story, he blushed, closed his eyes and said, "I've heard people in similar situations say how at such times you feel an intensity to what is happening, and that everything slows down. That's how it was with me. Everything started going as if in slow motion."

The mujahedeen were attacking from the east and south sides, the sun was blinding, and then something flashed. Zheka looked up and saw the grenade flying slowly, to the side, a little closer to Parkhomin. He watched it spinning in the air, slowly falling. He was paralyzed with fear. His whole life literally flashed before his eyes and he knew, this was it – death.

He saw that he hadn't done anything in particular in his life, that it had been useless. He was afraid. Moments passed as slowly as syrup; everything had stopped. He looked at Parkhomin, then at the grenade. Parkhomin shouted something to the radio operator and suddenly noticed the grenade. Zheka saw a giant wave of fright in his eyes to be replaced a moment later with regret. He briefly glanced at the clay partition in the shelter. He still had a chance to save himself, but the other two – Zheka and the machine gunner – didn't stand the slightest, even theoretical chance. What's more, if the grenade blew up it would most likely tear through the thin clay walls and bury anyone in the other room.

There was only one thing to do. Parkhomin's face showed his clear decisiveness as he threw himself on the grenade. Zheka repeated several times, "I remember it clearly. Everything was in slow motion."

Just as in a rugby match, Parkhomin grabbed the grenade and curled up with it under a small table – a simple, wooden one, but solid. He yelled, "Lay down!" Zheka and Ruchnikov, both from the Ryazinski region, threw themselves down and covered their heads, as they had been trained, and then a deafening blast let out. They walked away from it without a scratch, just some temporary deafness. The mujahedeen aborted their attack on the house, having decided that everyone had died.

A little bit later you could see something flashing in the sky – helicopters, forcing back the mujahedeen advance. Reinforcements had arrived and they were saved.

The next events were a bit foggy for Zheka. He knew that Parkhomin had saved them from sure death by paying a dear price – his own life. Sappers from the reinforcement group laid mines through the village and everyone was ordered back to base. Back at the base, the wounded, and those who had carried them onto the helicopters, said that one man had died, but that they couldn't really

carry him back because his body had been torn apart. They presumed he was the radio operator or a commander. No one wanted even to think that it might be Parkhomin. When it came out that it had indeed been his body, everyone took off their helmets and many soldiers cried openly.

First lieutenant Semenko – soldiers just called him 'Sema' or 'jackal Sema' – felt no shame, cried and groaned at them, "Why could not you take care of him? You dogs." He cussed them out. Semenko had become good friends with Parkhomin. While he was first arriving at the base, they fell under artillery bombardment. Two men were sitting in HQ – a sergeant, assistant to base security, and a friend, the sentry chief. They were going to be demobilized in a few weeks. Seeing a 'green' junior lieutenant on his way to headquarters, they started yelling at him on the base speakers once the shells started falling. "Lieutenant Semenko, take cover, immediately! Duck, now. Good grief, get down!"

They were laughing at him. They were all in a safe zone where the shell shrapnel couldn't hit, and they were just entertaining themselves: "Duck for cover! Crawl! Cover your head and crawl." When the lieutenant really did start crawling to the battalion he knew that they were making fun of him. But he couldn't just ignore a seasoned sergeant, much less since he was from another division. It happened when Parkhomin appeared and furiously laid into them: "You're playing games?! Are you nuts? I guess you've been on headquarters staff for so long, you've forgotten what it's like out there. I'll fix that with an assignment tomorrow. You'll join me in a convoy to protect a diesel transport. I'll set it up with the battalion commander." Ashen-faced, they fell over themselves apologizing. They had good reason – they only had two weeks left to serve in combat. In their thoughts and dreams – they were already back home. They knew Parkhomin didn't make idle threats.

Parkhomin set off for the lieutenant, embraced him and said, "Don't let it bother you. Here – anything can happen! Everyone is afraid at first. The main thing to know is whether you can overcome your fear." And that was so; he didn't say anything special, he just reached out to him, man to man.

Lieutenant Semenko also earned the respect of his soldiers in time, because he knew how to lead well. After several battles he earned the order of the Red Star[8] and just in half a year, the rank of first lieutenant. In a year he was experienced enough that no one laughed at him anymore. He never forgot those words of encouragement, though: "Don't let it bother you. Everyone is afraid. The main thing to know is whether you can overcome your fear."

Now this man, the hero, having overcome his fears and paid his life to save others, is no longer with us. He'd had so little time left to serve in Afghanistan, too.

* * *

The soldiers with minor wounds were brought back to base and given two weeks rest and rehab. The first week they didn't even don their uniforms. The battalion's political officer came by and gave Zheka the task of writing an unofficial funerary speech in remembrance of Parkhomin to give to his parents and wife. He wanted them to know the details of his heroic death. He told him, "We're sending his valuables back home, but everything else, you take with you and give them personally. After all, your tour of duty is almost at an end."

Zheka found Parkhomin's old paratrooper knapsack in the weapon's room. In it were photos of his family, some T-shirts, books, two thin notebooks full of writing, and a letter to his son. Under some things in a drawer of a small table in the captain's quarters, Zheka found a black book. It was in English and had some comments and a few unidentifiable words written in the margins. There were also some pages of full translation. He started to read some of it and understood – this was a Bible.

He found Parkhomin's diary and was taken aback, because if something like this were found with a soldier, it could mean disciplinary action for the whole battalion. Now he remembered that half a year ago, before Parkhomin went on leave, they had gotten word from the regiment's military

[8] The Order of the Red Star was a military award of the Soviet Union for bravery.

intelligence that there was an American mercenary in one of the villages. It hadn't been the only time; these mercenaries operated right under their noses. Their spying operations were highly professional. This time was no exception. Once they reached the spot, their scouting party couldn't find any mercenaries, but they did get some trophies, so to speak. They found assorted weaponry and various things, among which were books, apparently a Bible.

Zheka read the translation of biblical passages and he was stunned by the text's depth and unusual nature, calling to mind a message sent from another world. It was forbidden to keep a diary, especially with entries detailing where they had been and what their assignments had been. But on these diary pages were philosophic ideas, written in very small, but legible handwriting.

It was clear that the handwritten notes were for him, not others, which pointed to the fact that Parkhomin was a spiritual, deep person. Several prayers were even written out. In his things, Zheka found an Orthodox Russian Christian prayer and an amulet (as it turned out, it belonged him before the war), though, for some reason Parkhomin hadn't taken it with him on the last mission. Later, after meeting Parkhomin's relatives, Zheka found out that his grandfather had kept it with him throughout World War II, and so he finally understood the source of Parkhomin's ideals.

There was also a letter to his son. On a large envelope was written: "If something happens to me, send it to my son. Let him read it when he turns 16."

Zheka read a few paragraphs which had been translated from the Bible. They impressed him deeply, even though they were only words. Since that time he began to pray and remembered how his grandmother had taught him to cross his heart and he did same, too. He did it when nobody was near because no one would understand it.

Insofar as he had been slightly wounded, they assigned him to security detail on the HQ and warehouse. Now he had a lot of his own time to reflect on his life. He gave his word of honor to God yet again, but this time with much greater awareness: "God, if I return alive, I want to serve You; I want to read and learn the Bible. I am only alive because such people as Captain Parkhomin sacrificed their lives for me. I have no right to live without virtue."

In a few months, he returned to the Soviet Union. He later remembered going through the border crossing station. He had used his saved-up soldier 'scrip', at the time valued higher than regular rubles, to buy himself a Japanese radio/ tape player and a watch. At the border crossing, the guards were being excessively attentive to customs rules and took it away from him, reprimanded him, and, to top it off, right in front of him discussed which of them was going to get to keep them. (At the time, these were unusual, valuable items.)

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