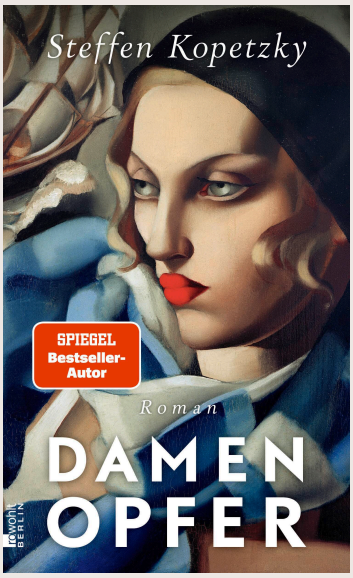
Steffen Kopetzky

QUEEN SACRIFICE

Damenopfer

- A great discovery - the life of one of the most courageous and exciting women of the early 20th century: the revolutionary and spy Larissa Reissner.
- 110,000 copies sold of his previous novels *Monschau* and *Propaganda*. Both novels spent weeks on the *Spiegel* bestseller list.
- Kopetzky's *Risk* (Klett Cotta) was nominated for the German Book Prize.
- English sample translation is available.



August 2023 · 448 pages

Moscow, 1923. Larissa Reissner, as a Soviet ambassador in Kabul, has discovered strategic plans that could overthrow the British Empire. In the shimmering capital, where the world is being rethought and reinvented, she searches for the author, a German named Niedermayer. The victory of freedom is Reissner's meaning of life. The young writer and revolutionary is celebrated as a miracle daughter of her epoch. Coming from an illustrious family, she met Lenin as a child, she fought as political commissar of the Volga fleet; Pasternak and Trotsky admired her. From Moscow, Reissner sets off for Berlin - on her greatest mission: to assist a creation of a secret alliance between the Soviet Union and the German military, personified by General Tuchachevsky, the "Red Napoleon," and dazzling Oskar von Niedermayer. But Larissa pursues her own goals. A web of relationships develops between her and the two men that has enormous explosive power - both amorously and politically.
An extraordinary novel in which Ho Chi Minh has his say as well as the Lord Seal Keeper of the British Empire or the poet princess Anna Akhmatova. Steffen Kopetzky captures the life of Larissa Reissner, who wanted nothing less than to change the world.

"This balance of craft and substance is rare." FAZ
"Kopetzky is a brilliant storyteller." ZDF Morgenmagazin

Steffen Kopetzky, born in 1971, is the author of novels, stories, radio plays and theatre plays. His novel *Risiko* (2015) was on the *Spiegel* magazine bestseller list for months and was nominated for the German Book Prize, while *Propaganda* (2019) was nominated for the Bavarian Book Prize. From 2002 to 2008, Kopetzky was the artistic director of the Theatre Biennale Bonn. He lives in his hometown Pfaffenhofen an der Ilm with his family.

Rowohlt Verlag
Steffen Kopetzky

Please contact:

Lizenzen@rowohlt.de

Steffen Kopetzky

QUEEN SACRIFICE

English sample translation by Katy Derbyshire

Chapter 1

ONCE UPON A TIME IN AFGHANISTAN

Kabul, Emirate of Afghanistan

August 1922 – May 1923

'How many more generations of workers must putrefy alive in the bulges of English fat until the time comes for this lump of lard to fulfil his own destiny as fertiliser?'

Larissa Reissner's latest *Pravda* feature from Afghanistan brought the ire of Kabul's British establishment down upon her. 'The House of Machines' appeared to have hit its imperialist mark.

Particularly this rather memorable image wounded the embassy secretary's susceptible British pride. Larissa provided an equally memorable description of the Sheffield-born director of Afghanistan's only textiles factory, a man 'so improbably, indecently obese and so wreathed in layers of fat that, while he was bathing, a frog once got caught in the bulges of his belly and suffocated, which only became apparent several days later through the unpleasant smell.'

At the time, she found it remarkable that the British embassy lodged an official complaint the moment the article appeared. The publication of such a piece, bristling with hostile and contemptuous formulations – the embassy noted – was not befitting for the wife of the Russian representative, even if Russia was now called socialist. While they did not officially recognise the Bolsheviks – the complaint added – certain conventions nonetheless existed between decent representatives of states, provided they aimed to be more than bands of brigands. The pot calling the kettle black: British policy had consisted for centuries of nothing but swindling and plundering.

'Afghanistan, this great poverty-stricken land, many parts of which are literally stuck in the Middle Ages,' Larissa had written, 'whose nature and society captivate and exhaust us in equal measure, is something like the most important country in the world – for it is the greatest weak point for England, that head of the world-ruling kraken, where labour and capital wrestle for life and death. Once one has understood that, one then understands why one meets polite Englishmen all over Afghanistan, the politest of smiles at the ready, that smile which slices through their faces like the tips of rifle bullets.'

The memorandum of complaint practically tripped over itself, referring to 'barbarically poor style' and demanding an apology, which Larissa had of course not granted. Admittedly, the part about the lump of lard and his destiny was indeed a stark image – but what was wrong with that? Everyone had to die at some point and they went on to fertilise the planet, whether they wanted to or not.

Aside from the perfectly formulated diplomatic tit-for-tat, however, the message was clear: there was at least one person in the Anglo-Indian intelligence service who read the *Pravda*, a newspaper not available in Afghanistan and difficult to obtain in India, and knew that the pen name Larissa Reissner referred to the wife of the representative of the Russian Socialist Soviet Republic, known here in Kabul only as L. M. Raskolnikova. Besides that, they often complained about the ambassador's own anti-British statements – without guessing who had written the majority of them.

The permanent vexation to the Indian Raj caused by the hammer and sickle flag flying proudly above a grand palace on the southern bank of the Kabul River, however, is presumably nothing in comparison to what Larissa is undertaking right now.

'Here, please... Madame...' The young worker lowers his eyes, hesitating before he dares to look directly at the tall woman: 'Comrade Larissa.'

The man from the factory who brought her here, his head and face engulfed in a Pashtun-style scarf, shows her the rusty door almost blocked by climbing roses and fig trees growing along the wall, through which they can access the rear part of the garden without anyone noticing. A secret pathway the young man has known since his childhood. After a short walk, they reach the simple clay-brick building.

The afternoon light pierces the lattice of an unglazed window, casting six shadow crosses across the floor and bare walls. A falcon cries in the sky above the hut. Larissa, dressed in a snow-white English blouse, jodhpurs and riding boots, kneels on the floor, unwraps the thick linen cloth encasing the bundle she takes from its hiding place in the wall, and places it on a little wooden stool in front of her. She tucks a lock of her chestnut-brown hair behind her ear and inspects her find: notebooks of different formats, not numbered or in any other order. She opens them up, flicks through the pages: as far as she can see, all the entries are in German, some journal-like, others more reminiscent of essays. Their subjects are life in Kabul and the surrounding area, what is available on the markets, units of measurement and length, road connections, but also notes on persons of import whom the writer met, and surprisingly in-depth analyses of the court and the

political situation. All from the time of the late Emir Habibullah. Every line makes it apparent that the writer was a military man who must have been driven by great geographical interest in Afghanistan's affairs. His handwriting is pristine, as neat as a clerk's notes.

'WHEN CONTINENTS AWAKEN', Larissa reads a sentence underlined and in capital letters, 'ISLAND EMPIRES ARE DESTROYED!' Sadly, it is not followed by any further detail, but it is clear enough what it refers to: Asia and Europe against Britain.

Yet the urgent desire to meet the writer of this gigantic convolute in person burns brightest in Larissa when she opens a large-format folder and finds inside it a dozen loose sheets sketching out every last detail of a possible campaign against British India, launched from Afghanistan. The military goal appears to be to end British rule over the subcontinent and liberate the jewel in the empire's crown.

For Larissa, who has now spent almost two years without pause in Afghanistan, the British are nothing but merciless imperialists who deserve nothing more than to be driven out of India. Her first visit to the British embassy, located slightly outside Kabul beneath the Bagh-e-Bala palace, opened her eyes: it is the largest and most magnificent British establishment abroad, larger than their embassies in Paris, Berlin or Washington – and the pomp that the British ambassador Francis Humphrey and his wife Gertrude put on there almost intimidated her, to begin with.

Over the past few months, however, she has come to understand more and more why the British here in Afghanistan are so keen to dispel even the slightest impression that India could ever be free, or indeed ruled (and exploited) by anyone but them – unrestricted control over the subcontinent plays a decisive role. Were Britain to lose India, it would spell out the beginning of the end of the empire. The first stage of a checkmate in seven moves on the geopolitical chessboard. This find, in other words, these notes and descriptions, are concerned with nothing less than world domination. And that means the assault sketched out with military precision in the notes she has been perusing for the past hour –an attack on the Durand Line via the Khyber Pass, carried out by a small corps of regular troops and Pashtun tribal warriors fighting as precisely as elite units, allied with their brother tribes on the Indian side of the line – would be the greatest service anyone could do for the communist world revolution at that moment in time.

Larissa rewraps the notes, ties them carefully and places them in her satchel, artfully sewn together out of many small patches of leather. She calls for the young man waiting anxiously outside for her to finish at last. She met him on her visit to the factory and made friends with him to some extent. His late father had been a janitor of sorts at the villa and told him that German

soldiers had lived there during the Great European War. They had spent all their time pushing wooden figures to and fro across a large map, he'd said. Like a type of chess, though his father had understood the rules as little as he did the terribly scratchy and blunt German in which they had spent night after night discussing and arguing. Then, he said, the group had broken up; one of them had been severely wounded and was even connected to a failed attempt on Emir Habibullah's life in Nuristan. Before he left, the leader of the Almanis had hidden these notes in the hut where the young man's father stored his gardening equipment and tools.

Now that Larissa has seen them, she understands what made the convolute so valuable: it is a perfect plan for war.

She drapes the leather bag containing the notes around her neck and then slips underneath her chador, which all women must wear in public, by law. She was given hers by the emir's own mother, immediately after her arrival. At first, she thought the full-body veil was a joke, but it was in fact impossible to take even a step outside her residence without it. Venturing outside now into the oppressive heat of the late August day weighing heavily on the city, she is glad of the chador for the first time; it shrouds her body so well that no one who might have followed her could possibly see she is carrying something of value on her person.

She wants to give the young man some money, but he refuses it.

'No, I did it for you and for – the workers' revolution!' Then he nods once at Larissa and runs as fast as he can down the hill, in the opposite direction to the one from which they came.

Outside the estate's wall of massive stones, slightly concealed among bushes, three of the Baltic sailors who accompanied Raskolnikov and Larissa to Afghanistan are waiting with horses. They had come to the country with horses too; most of them, loyal companions since the Civil War days, had only learned to ride on the journey from Soviet Tashkent. On that tour of over a month, they had suffered sunburn and sunstroke, severe diarrhoea, constipation and all the other complaints heaped upon inexperienced travellers by hot, harsh central Asia. All of them are now deeply tanned, bearded, skin thick as leather; they have learned to dress and behave like the locals and a good number of them speak passable Dari. Their service at the first regular Bolshevik embassy has severed them entirely from their former maritime existence, and yet allowed them to be born again as a team. The Red Mariners of Kabul stick together as they once did in Kronstadt, as on the Volga and the Caspian Sea, performing their duties without complaint; except that their conversations are all about when it will finally be time to return to the Baltic. Yet every one of them would walk through fire for Larissa – she is the revolutionary soul of their strange garrison

on the Hindu Kush, stationed there to absolve essential representation in the first state to have officially recognised the otherwise diplomatically isolated Bolsheviks.

As they trot slowly back to Kabul, Larissa in their midst beneath her chador, she can think of nothing but opening up the war plan against India again and immersing herself in its details. Should it be put into practice one day soon, the years of hardship and humiliation caused by the incomprehensible British lack of scruples and their skills in the battle for influence would not have been in vain, and there would have been a point to sitting tight on Emir Amanullah's nerve-wracking diplomatic merry-go-round as he circled – like every other Afghan ruler before him – between loathing for the British and yearning for the boon of their bribes. They have just come through an almost absurd period when Enver Pasha, the former Young Turk and war minister for the Ottoman empire, launched a Muslim uprising against the Bolsheviks in Bukhara with a few thousand men, thus reawakening Emir Amanullah's old hope of a central Asian Muslim union beyond Russia and Britain and postponing the almost completed treaty between Afghanistan and the Russians to some point in the distant future. To the great pleasure of the British, who at the same time sent Indian troops on manoeuvre to the borders of the tribal territories, threatening to attack at any time, invade the Pashtun villages and perhaps even advance to Kabul itself. Only Enver Pasha's death and the Red Army's victory brought the emir round to conferring his favour on the Soviets again. This diplomatic war of nerves, intensified by the temporary confiscation of her radio and thus weeks spent cut off from the news from Moscow, assaulted Larissa's mood like caries attacking a tooth. Her morale is at rock-bottom, her fighting spirit exhausted. Yet now she has made this inexplicable discovery – a new perspective.

They cross the beautiful garden landscape along the road down to the Kabul River, riding between apricot orchards and fields of maize, and soon reach the centre of the city swarming with traders and buyers, cook-shops and animals, where almost none of the streets give any sign that they are in the early twentieth century rather than the nameless time of universal Middle Ages.

Above the artfully bricked roads and cobbled alleys, falcons call out their signals, while the boys who have spent their day lugging loads, beating rugs or pushing carts are waiting for the bit of supper their mothers can cook for them, and until then they fly kites with earnest, dignified expressions. Aromas of roasting mutton, buzzing of flies and the enticing, sometimes over-perfumed scent of sweet fruit permeate the thin weave of Larissa's viewing window, as the slight sway of her horse and the brutal heat of the afternoon mingle with the hubbub of voices to an

almost unreal sound collage. Khoob hasti, how are you, she hears, and salam alaykum and the hundredfold response wa alaykum salam...

They arrive at the Russian residency. Decorated with countless delicate lattice windows and a handsome balustrade, the house once belonged to the former finance minister Mustaufi ul-Mamalel, one of the most corrupt of his calling in all of Asia. Dismounting her horse, Larissa feels a disquieting sense of deep exhaustion; she has to hold onto the saddle for a moment before she dares to set foot on the ground.

Then she pulls off the chador in the same motion with which she dismounts. Boatswain Golnikov will take care of the horses.

'Where is the ambassador?'

The sailor at the entrance, holding his rifle comfortably but absolutely correctly, wobbles his head. He has known the Raskolnikovs since their posting to the Caspian Sea – where a fateful mosquito had drunk its fill from Larissa and the admiral had seen his last combat. The Caspian operation had ruined the both of them.

Since his subsequent collapse due to acute pneumonia in December 1921 and despite the best state sanatorium on the Crimea, Raskolnikov has never really got back on his feet, and is sadly all the more dependent on alcohol these days. Larissa enters his bureau to find the usual scene. The sloppily drawn curtains have plunged the room into chiaroscuro, momentarily reminiscent perhaps of a chessboard – on the large sofa her husband, a Dostoevsky volume splayed on his chest as he slumbers, on the costly blue carpet beneath his dangling arm an empty vodka bottle.

She removes the book from his broad seaman's chest: *Crime and Punishment*. The copy he had with him during his prison years. His treasure. In the margins, notes from prison, the underground names of his fellow prisoners, his revolutionary comrades. Diary entries. The novel is his shield, the origin of his party membership, a bible from the precious and irretrievable time of illegality when he was part of a small revolutionary cell formed around a student with the pseudonym 'Molotov' and named himself, out of admiration for Dostoevsky, after the novelist's most famous character, the skull-splitter Raskolnikov.

So many of his old comrades have died; their iconic battle names, never to be bestowed again, are his calendar of saints. Many of his old comrades turned to other factions, built careers for themselves and became strangers to him, the book-lover who then climbed the ranks to admiral. Yet in the notes and jottings in his copy of *Crime and Punishment*, the world of his origins is still alive. It will never be that of his wife, three years his junior.

Now he is snoring softly on the sofa. Covered only by a tightly stretched white shirt, his belly is as bloated as a whale's. A beached whale, of course.

Him too, she had had in mind in her farcical report on the 'House of Machines' when she mocked the fat factory director – she wrote about him for the readers of *Pravda* as she did about him, her husband. But Raskolnikov, of course, has not yet read the carbon copy of her article she put on his desk, nor the day's post alongside it. All of it is unopened on the huge piece of furniture. Indian-made, since the Afghans themselves do not have furniture in their houses, the desk is covered in intricate carvings that make it look as if the leaves originally entwining the wood had been magically transformed. The artist rubbed the recessions in the carvings with lapis lazuli dust, lending them unusual colouring.

She throws the chador on one of the visitors' seats at the desk, calls out through the open door to the corridor that she wants a samovar, clears aside the embassy post, which she will take care of later, and in its place, she deposits the German notes from her bag. Extravagant in the face of her find, she lights first the two large petroleum lamps on the desk and then a cigarette – an English Dunhill, which she prefers to Soviet makes, as with her beloved perfume Rose France, also obtained in London. Her two greatest weaknesses: indulgence – and taste.

By the time Ambassador Raskolnikov, her husband, the admiral and former commander of the heroic Volga fleet, wakes from his stupor with a long sigh an hour later, she has gained an overview of the notes and put them in rough order. She has studied the war plan precisely, traced it on old tsarist-era maps with which they were equipped by Moscow's foreign minister Chicherin before their departure. Some of the notes remain a mystery to her, however; repeated notations more fitting for a chess match. Then there are number combinations, as if someone had written down the results of a strange game of roulette. Patterns.

'Lyalya, darling,' Raskolnikov utters, rising from the sofa with a groan. Adjusts his braces over his shirt, runs a hand over his beard and pads over to her barefoot to help himself to a cup of tea. He has a slight limp.

'Slept well?' She does not even look up, merely holds out her cheek to him as he leans down, balancing his tea awkwardly, to give her a kiss. His breath is a deep pit of bad habits, his stubble scratches her milky-soft skin; he has to hold onto the desk, obviously still rather dizzy.

'Just nodded off, darling, the heat,' says the man with the old fighter's name, and he slips into the double-breasted jacket hanging over the back of the chair now occupied by Larissa.

'What have you got there?'

'Notes made by a German officer stationed here in Kabul during the Great War. They were looking into a military campaign against British India. Look…'

She uses her pencil to point out individual positions and sections and explains to her husband, who reads very little German, what she suspects behind the notes.

'Perhaps there'll soon be a war again between the English and Afghanistan. The tension is growing every day...' he murmurs.

'I don't think you've quite understood me,' she says. 'I'm talking about a plan to liberate India from British rule. Afghanistan is the starting point, not the actual goal.'

'Certainly...' Raskolnikov murmurs. He strokes her cheek and leaves the room, his prison Dostoevsky clamped under one arm. In his eyes and motions, Larissa recognises the brash impatience that comes over the old fighter when he feels the need for a gulp of vodka. She herself has her Dunhill cigarettes and consumes endless cups of tea, both of which see her through to the tender tips of rosy dawn.

Over and over she combs through the German notes, envisaging the road to India free and imagining the lever that might lift British rule off its hinges and make the world a radically different place – yet there is a lot that she does not understand; plenty remains in the dark. Then, in the small hours, she finally discovers a name. It looks like a kind of signature, perhaps that of the writer:

Oskar Niedermayer, Royal Bavarian First Lieutenant.

Suddenly absolutely exhausted, smoking one last cigarette, she rises from the desk and repeats the name to herself a few times: Niedermayer. Very German, almost banal. And Bavarian to boot...

As she gets to her feet she feels a slight dizziness, by no means from the cigarette. Her temples throb, her eyes burn so painfully that she suddenly sees only through a blur. An unsettling heat rises within her and swathes her like a new chador, a blazing cloak in which she throws herself on the bed in her room, all of a sudden too weak even to remove her riding boots. Her head rests exhausted on the pillow but her body finds no relief. Her forehead breaks out in a sweat, the cloak of heat laces itself tighter around her, oppressing her, and if Larissa had the strength she would tear it off but she can't; the oppression and the dizziness go together, all of a sudden growing as big and heavy as a carpet: soon she loses consciousness. It is malaria, taking possession of her after months without symptoms.

At some point in the early hours of the morning, one of the sailors finds her on her bed and fetches Raskolnikov, who informs the old ship's doctor on the embassy staff, who in turn can do nothing but administer quinine and make sure she gets sufficient liquids.

Over the first few days she is barely conscious, immersed deep in the gruelling presence of her fever, yet the German name Niedermayer stays with her, becoming a mania, a phantom that appears to her in manifold garbs and disguises and leads her through cataclysms in which entire worlds collapse. Feverish, she dreams of deployment zones and canons, the passes of the Hindu Kush; tribal warriors' horses whip up dust as they gallop past her, and she begins to understand at last how the war against the imperialists can be won – she sees the very battle. Yet whenever her ailing mind attempts to retain any of it the figures slip away, the troops of the world revolution she commands collapse like dust devils in the noonday heat. Only one thing remains of her visions: the name Oskar Niedermayer.

The most severe of her malaria attacks since she was infected on the Caspian Sea in 1920 confines her to her sickbed for two weeks, but even after that she still feels its aftereffects. Malaria is like a spectre, lodged in the bones, muscles and tendons of her body and nourishing itself continually from her vital energy after every abatement, until it grows strong enough again to raise its head in full form. After these two weeks Larissa is positive, cheerful in fact, boiled clean, as it were, and sees the world with sharpened senses. But her body, she can feel, is much weaker than before the episode.

Once she has sufficient energy she returns to work: holding receptions, continuing to meet the emir's mother and wives, many of whom she counts as friends; they admire her. Writing letters. Studying late at night, alone, the German officer Niedermayer's notes, from which she learns a great deal. They are like a seminar on a brand-new subject: geopolitics.

On this basis, she attempts to interpret the meagre news they receive via their contested Telefunken device.

With Petty Officer Strukhov, her radio operator on the gunship *Ivan Communist* – a highly important factor back on the Kazan front – she spends entire nights at the radio, sometimes arm in arm. They occasionally pick up British radio communications between India and Egypt – the two most important possessions in Britain's world island empire. They eavesdrop on distant freight ships. Newspapers arrive once a week. The most important matter for them is of course the foundation of the Soviet Union, which takes place in December, finally ending the Russian Civil War and succeeding the Russian Empire. The four independent nations Russia, Belorussia,

Ukraine and the Transcaucasian Soviet Republic – made up of Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia – found the USSR, the biggest country on earth. Alongside this significant occurrence, which gives her a mighty sense of pride, Larissa gains the following picture of the world's situation from her Afghan perspective at the start of 1923:

A British-dominated conference is held in Lausanne, presenting a peace treaty with Kemal Atatürk's newly founded Turkish Republic, made possible through its huge war successes. They zealously discuss Atatürk's achievements; under his leadership, Turkey has become a gigantic role model, not only for Amanullah but also for the Bolsheviks, who watch in astounded admiration as he gets his way with the victorious Western powers of the Great War. The Turkish Republic regains control over the straits, for instance. Neither Germany nor the directly abutting nascent Soviet Union are formally invited to Lausanne – but Moscow was at least allowed to propose closing the Dardanelles entirely for foreign warships, an idea that none of the old powers is willing to adopt.

Larissa quickly understands why: there are plenty of White forces, monarchists and reactionaries still armed and itching for battle, in the previously Ottoman Gallipoli. It would be a simple matter to form an invading army out of them and drop them off on the Crimean Peninsula. All they would need would be passage through the Black Sea.

Then, that spring, the British foreign secretary Lord Curzon dispatches a 'sharply worded' note objecting to the Bolsheviks' dirty deeds in the former Russian empire: oppressing British citizens; impeding British maritime traffic in international waters; religious persecution. Added to that is the increasing anti-British propaganda in Persia, India and Afghanistan. Curzon – what chutzpah – issues the governments of the latter three countries with an ultimatum: throw out the Soviet ambassadors, or else.

'The British want our government to have no ties to the rest of the world. No other viewpoints, no other standpoints than the British are to count,' Emir Amanullah fumes in response. The British ambassador paid him a personal visit to pass him the foreign minister's note.

'Trying to tell me who I'm allowed to talk to – and bombing our villages on the border to India at the same time!'

That same evening, Raskolnikov and Larissa receive an invitation for the bestowal of a noble order to the Soviet ambassador. It is the usual game – the swaying pendulum of patronage from a fairly benevolent ruler of a small country, trying to resist the British principle of a little carrot and a lot of stick. Now he wants to make a visible display of his independence, hence his

fawning over the admiral ambassador. But none of it will change a thing, let alone revolutionise the country; Larissa is sure of that.

Using the extremely sparse agency news reports from abroad and the inner-Afghan messenger reports from the eastern border, where British troops are currently destroying Pashtun villages on the Afghan side and even using poison gas, she tries to piece together an understanding of the bigger picture.

A pacified and compensated Turkey, likely to remain neutral for the time being, increases the Western Allies' options in the Black Sea – why not invade the Crimea, after all? A longstanding French fantasy. At the same time, the attacks on the Pashtun tribes testify to detailed knowledge – they are not random; they take place with military anthropological logic: during the current winter, there is nowhere for the tribes to go. They would have to abandon their herds, something they would never do, making them easy targets in their crowded villages.

If London wants it so, children and old folks living from their sheep die eight thousand kilometres away, she thinks. That is global power. Something has to be done against this world system, these intelligence connections and this logic of precisely targeted armed violence. With the Niedermayer Plan – or whatever it is the notes she discovered stand for.

Marital life between her and Raskolnikov proceeds as between so many; not without eruptions on his part, Bolshevist, sentimental. He sometimes seems to her rather like an old family pet, whom she does not want to deprive of his habits. Yet inside her matures the resolution to leave Afghanistan as soon as possible. Alone. And to take their secrets with her.

Eventually, in May of 1923 she watches the sailors of the Red Embassy carrying her luggage to the trunk of one of the few cars in the country, and in the very last hours of her stay, before she leaves Afghanistan on an arduous two-week journey via Bamyan and finally the Turkmenia-Soviet border, she writes a letter to her parents, intended to speed ahead of her to Moscow:

'If it has come so far that Afghanistan is in a state of war with Britain, if its borders are soaked in the blood of the tribes and the emir can count on nobody but us for support: if all this is laid out on the playing field and the workers of Russia have no other option but to help the tribal peoples, destroyed for hundreds of years, besieged for hundreds of years – if we let this moment pass us by, then there is nothing left for us to do in central Asia but shut up shop. For how useful and gratifying it would be right now, after Lausanne, to remind the British Empire of its weak spot in the east.'

Chapter 5

IN ANNA AKHMATOVA'S SALON

Leningrad, *February 1926*

Changing names was standard procedure. Which was why Ossip Emilyevich Mandelstam was out and about that morning not in St Petersburg, nor in Petrograd but in Leningrad, and marching not along Liteiny Prospect, or the foundry boulevard – for the Baltic fleet's first canon foundry had once been down on the Neva – but along Volodarsky Prospect.

Volodarsky, in turn, had been the codename of one of the most talented agitators in the northern party organisation, commissioner for media and editor-in-chief of the *Krasnaya Gazeta*, the Red Gazette, the city's most important daily. Moisei Markovich Goldstein, alias Volodarsky, had been killed in 1918 by an industrially manufactured lead bullet fired from a Luger parabellum wielded by his assassin, a leftist social revolutionary – and now his nom de guerre had replaced one of the city's oldest street names.

The date was 10 February 1926, and on that date the great city so often renamed, now no longer a capital, was doing its darndest to display all the cold damp winter specialities for which it had always been famous. The sealed-up windows grew bulges of ice as big as horsemeat sausages; whereby the icy variety was far more common that winter, since most of the horses had fertilised the battlefields of first the Great War and then the Civil War. The streets were swathed in such thick fog that one could barely see one's own hand in front of one's face; poetic weather, to some extent, for the poet is blind and sees with his soul; and poet's weather too because the fog instantly crystallised everywhere, turned to frost, and covered everything like an icy pelt. Anyone walking around for too long in that crystallising furry fog would no doubt have been fully enveloped by the freezing cloak at some point. The image captivated the universal poet.

A number 17 tram rattled past him, barely visible through the mist. Mandelstam enjoyed the even, monotonous clatter. All the sounds of the city, in fact.

Along the banks of northern river dash
The headlights with their new and skittish flash,
With steely dragonflies' and beetles' flitter...

he had once written. St Petersburg in winter, with its clanging symphony of fog sounds. A monumental montage of cinematic close-ups. Out of the dense fog flashed umbrellas, briefcases, worn-out shoes. Everyone wanted to get away. Everyone stayed where they were.

He passed the delicate façade of St Sergius' Cathedral; a few years ago, the official exhumation and scientific examination of Sergius' remains had been made into a lavishly produced film and a huge propaganda event, an absurd presentation of heathen ethnology. The thought of it made him laugh. For a writer living between all eras, in the universal world of poetry – a man who only alighted tangentially upon the real world now and then, only to make his escape on the wings of a Dantesque creature or a Homeric demigod – the present day was like a cabinet of curiosities at times. What efforts the authorities went to, to rewrite the past. He could laugh about it now.

He was in a buoyant mood, having just been to the money office of the Leningrad State Publishing House and received two hundred roubles for a translation commission! An old patron of his, whom he knew from Odessa and called his uncle, had ordered an immediate and full advance. He intended to have half of it transferred to his wife Nadezhda, currently treating her tuberculosis in Yalta, a woman whose body temperature and weight he entered in a logbook, in which he also noted whether she was 'walking' or 'lying' and other health matters. It was important to him that she reported her state of health on a daily basis, even though he had repeated romances and affairs, like everyone they knew, the most recent a few months ago; even though they often argued and fought. He loved her in an almost childlike way.

Mandelstam leaned his weight against the brass-embossed revolving door of the telegraph office; he had to exert some effort to get it to open. The hall inside swallowed him up, full of people, and he joined the queue for telegraphic money transfers. A scent of damp, rarely washed clothing and rubber pervaded the telegraph office, built in the generous proportions of a ballroom back when it was the Royal Post Office.

The man behind the counter knew him and almost began writing before Mandelstam had said a word. Money to Yalta! Considering the large sum he'd been paid, he added an extra twenty roubles in lovestruck enthusiasm, sending Nadezhda a hundred and twenty, which meant he only had eighty left for himself. For a man who could not afford an apartment of his own and was forced to spend his nights under a horsehair blanket on his brother's family's sofa, that was a great deal of money; enough to lead a carefree life for four or five days. Admittedly, he would have to work many, many hours for the money, since it was an advance – but he banished all thoughts of

that. He loved the past, but he lived on the future. Money, or in fact its constant lack, was the basso continuo in their life. But if it was suddenly available for a day or a few hours, it felt like he'd never been without it. All poverty was instantly forgotten.

How wonderful it was to watch the official money transfer form cross the counter and to know that this procedure would lead, two thousand kilometres further south, to his beloved Nadik being able to afford good food and a heated room, at least for ten days.

With part of the remaining money, he would buy a nice cake for their good friend Anna Andreyevna Akhmatova, who lived not far from the telegraph office and had invited him over for the afternoon. Another reason for his good mood; it was always an honour, a gift, when Anninka had time to receive him.

Before that, though, he proceeded to an establishment to drink a glass of porter and eat a little ham. The eatery was popular, its odour of food smells, damp clothes, coal stoves and sealed-up windows as solid, as he entered, as a brick wall. Typical for the once so grand Petersburg, the silver city of Italian baroque endowed with Russian means, a city at the same time also ambivalent, dark and debauched. This place was a perfect fit for the city – bliss and stench in one, filled with the vapour of an army camp, an asylum or a caravansary. For that was their life, he often thought to himself: the life of refugees journeying through uncertainty and instability, but granted moments of intense happiness. The clear moments of truth. As if awakening for a moment. When watching the sparkling knife slicing through the ham at the meat counter. Like a ship bobbing up and down on the waves. He himself felt strangely alive at the sight – and for once, as healthy as a bull. He thought now of his Nadezhda on the Black Sea, which for him was a Homeric Grecian coast – compared to the sharpness of her thoughts and views, the carving knife was blunt.

Having paid for the ham and his freshly drawn beer, he squeezed behind a table, glass of porter in one hand, to eat and gaze around the place. To read people's faces. And, over a nearby shoulder, the *Krasnaja Gazeta*. The possessor of the newspaper, as gaunt as Mandelstam himself with nickel spectacles that kept slipping down his nose, prompting deft taps at them every second as if he were turning the page, was immersed in an explanatory article on the case of the Soviet diplomat murdered by Estonian spies in a sleeping car from Riga. Mandelstam, however, attentively skimmed the right-hand page of miscellanea facing him, and beneath the other man's reddened hand, marked with rheumatoid nodules and patiently holding the yellowish paper, he suddenly spotted a photo that put him into a state of shock. A beautiful young woman with a perfectly symmetrical face, gazing calmly out at him. An author's photo that he knew. It was Larissa

Reissner. Larissa Mikhailovna! Her obituary. Larissa Reissner was dead. Could that be? He leaned so far forward that he splashed beer on the man's newspaper.

'Excuse me, young man,' the indignant reader croaked, 'am I getting in your way?'

'Sorry, sir...' Mandelstam said, followed by an embarrassed sip of his porter. He gave him a look so devoted, and possibly also a tad pathetic, that the man handed him the page, shaking his head. He wasn't particularly interested in natural deaths, anyway.

'Someone you know?'

'Something like that,' Ossip Emilyevich murmured, accepting the page and skimming the obituary. Grew up in Petersburg; Red Army's first female commissar, with the Volga fleet; well-known journalist for the Moscow newspaper *Izvestia*; major reportages from Afghanistan and Germany. Suffered from typhus, admitted to Kremlin Hospital a few weeks previously. Died 9th of February. A committee had been formed, which had also placed an official burial announcement. Currently lying in state in the *Izvestia* offices. Funeral procession from there with civilian funeral, tomorrow, 11 February at three in the afternoon. She had only lived to the age of thirty.

Mandelstam shook his head, drained his beer and then folded the newspaper page, put it in his modest briefcase containing several drafts of anything-but-modest poems, nodded to the man and set off to find Anna Andreyevna – since the news of the death of Reissner's daughter, he knew, would be much more significant to her than to him.

The apartment where he would meet her was not far along the same road in the Fountain House, a typically disarming epithet for a section of a palace given to Prince Boris Sheremetev by Peter the Great. The magnificent façade was on the other side, facing a small tributary of the Neva later dubbed Fontanka, because the gardens of the various local palaces drew the water for their huge fountains from it. Although the Fountain House was only a functional building tucked away at the back of the Sheremetev Palace complex, it was still extremely spacious, large windows punctuating its façade as befitted a palace stairwell. Of course, everything was run-down and dirty, but filthy baroque nooks with tattered wallpaper were a perfectly normal phenomenon. On the third floor lived Anna Andreyevna's lover, a certain Punin, and with him, still, his wife and daughter.

Punin's wife Anna Evgenievna Arens, a likeable woman rather unsettled by the permanent presence of her future successor in her own home, opened the door to Mandelstam. He bowed, was let in, and they exchanged remarks on the terrible weather. Then Mrs Arens led the small man,

the universal poet so notorious and much-maligned in literary circles, along the corridor of her apartment as if it were a guesthouse, and knocked at the door of her husband's study as if she were a maid bringing tea.

'Do come in,' came Anna's voice from that very study, and Mandelstam, after another brief bow at the tolerant wife, slipped inside. While the streets of Petro-Leningrad were submerged in the typical Petersburg fog, Anna Gorenko, whose pen name Akhmatova paid tribute to her Bulgarian grandfather, had installed her own climate in Punin's study – of a volcanic nature. Making liberal use of her lover's coal supply – as an art historian advising the State Porcelain Manufacture, he had learned to help himself from the kiln department – the room was boiling hot, topped off by the blue haze of a constantly burning cigarette. Wherever Akhmatova went, there was always more smoke than air. The door closed. Subdued light from a red lampshade filled the room.

Like every visitor, Mandelstam first cast a long glance at the iconic portrait of Alexander Pushkin positioned on an easel in the middle of the room, as if the artist had just finished it. The intellectual twin sister as whom Ossip had identified Anna Andreyevna since their first meeting, something she too had shared, felt deeply connected to Pushkin in her poetic existence. Pushkin had attended the same genteel lyceum before her in Tsarskoye Selo, the Romanovs' summer residence near Petersburg, and the young Anna had written her first poem about him at the time. One of the reasons why she so valued Punin's apartment in the Sheremetev Palace was that this portrait had been drawn right there, in one of the salons on the Fontanka side. Thus, a fine line stretched – not only via Pushkin – from her childhood to the difficult present, a silvery shimmering spider's strand attached to distant points of the universe. It was incredible, in fact, that it held and carried Anna so safely.

They kissed cheeks, Anna's lit cigarette in her splayed hand.

'You're freezing cold, Ossip Emilyevich... Come, my dear, stand a little closer to the stove.'

'I'm fine, dear Anna… Oh, dear...'

'Hm?'

'I meant to bring cake. I completely forgot. How stupid of me. But I wanted to get here as soon as possible – here, look.'

The newspaper page featuring Larissa Reissner's obituary was handed over. Anna moved over to the desk and studied it in the reddish light of the lamp, took a drag on her cigarette and then read the obituary again.

'Now she's dead, the poor child,' she said, her voice sounding almost guilt-ridden.

She poured tea while Mandelstam sat down at the round table in the middle of the room, in front of a wide, Oriental-looking sofa. Then she leapt up and went light-footed, apparently not touching the floor, to the bureau in which she kept the copious personal papers of the late poet Gumilev, her first husband. He was the father of her son Lev and the third member of their poets' circle. They had called themselves 'Acmeists' – the only writers who had resisted the oppressive and paralysing domination of the Symbolists, their work polemic, serious and at times angry. Their idealisation of man and his alleged possibilities, their fascination with omnipotence and their randomly allocated systems of symbols – the Acmeists rejected all that, saw man as modest, integrated into the miracles of existence: not domination over a numb world without God was to be the yardstick for poetry, but instead a sense of marvel and humility towards the truths of the moment. They had announced as much in manifestos. But then came the war, revolution, coup and Civil War. The new powers-that-be, the Bolsheviks, were the veritable epitome of all human self-empowerment. The Petersburg Acmeists ended up on the margins, their Moscow friends Khlebnikov, Pasternak and Marina Zvetayeva also encountering problems. Suddenly, they were no longer the avantgarde – they were regressive opposition figures. The race to curry favour with the new state was won by the Futurists, very like in fascist Italy.

The Great War officer and staunch monarchist Gumilev had been executed by the party's secret service, the Cheka, in August 1921; his works were banned.

You will not rise from the snow,
Twenty-eight holes from the bayonet,
Five from the gun.

his widow had written. Though Anna Akhmatova's poems were not explicitly banned, they were still no longer printed anywhere. And so she had stopped writing some years ago now, but was not troubled by it in the slightest. Instead, this renunciation granted her an intellectual acuity that enabled her to maintain the soul of a world now submerged in terror and chaos and new order, a world called the Silver Age.

Mandelstam, sipping his tea from one of Punin's fine porcelain saucers, watched her as her neck bent over Gumilev's papers, as her near-transparent white hands casually transferred the cigarette between them to leaf through the pages written by another hand long crumbled to dust, as her sweet yet austere mouth formed a pout.

They had not known each other as children, but Anna Andreyevna had talked often enough of her childhood and early youth in Tsarskoye Selo, the tsars' village. Her happy years at the lyceum there, in the shade of her beloved Pushkin and passionately admired by a dark and handsome school friend, who had courted her from early on: Nikolai Gumilev. Then her father left the family; they moved to Kiev and Anna studied, but life abandoned by her father was an unhappy one. Eventually, she succumbed to Gumilev's wooing so as to bring at least a change into her life, although she did not love him. His poetic themes were of a heroic nature, travels to exotic lands and, inescapably, conquering and war – his first poetry collection, incredulously received by the dry Russian culture of the day, was entitled *The Path of the Conquistadors*.

Its poems conjured up the unrestrained yearning of such a conqueror on his first sight of the foreign coast, who goes ashore to take the mythical stronghold, and who does not rest or retreat until he sees his flag flying. And yet, after his successful conquest, he loses interest. Their marriage followed the same pattern, doomed to failure from its outset.

Gumilev, a man with the unusual trait of being unable to get along with himself and only feeling something akin to happiness in what he did not have, in a place where he was not, took her home to his house in Tsarskoye Selo after their wedding in 1910 and promptly left for Abyssinia. She was alone – but instead of growing depressed, she grew emancipated. She read. Began writing, in great intensity. By the time her husband returned from his travels, her first poetry volume was almost complete. Via the restless Gumilev, who was never thrifty with advice and suggestions on how to write, she met his friend Mandelstam. A spark lit instantly between Ossip and Anna, regardless of how different they were in poetic terms; a relationship came about between them that gave both of them new inspiration – and now it was Gumilev who began to observe in amazement what entirely innovative tone had entered Russian poetry, and who tried to learn from it. He was the driving force behind their manifesto, published on several occasions. It was not long before their group, the Acmeists, became famous.

'Here it is,' she said now, having leafed through a particular file of papers. 'I knew I'd find it. Here. Larissa's last letter to Nikolai.'

'Would you read it out to me?'

'It's just a few lines. First she complains bitterly about him betraying her, then she gets conciliatory and – as young people often say lightly in matters of love – she writes at the very end: "In the event of my death, all letters will return to you and with them that strange feeling that tied

us to one another, and which is so similar to love. Encounter miracles, make them yourself. My love, my lover. Yours, Leri.'"

'Leri. How sweet. And what did she call him?'

'Gafiz.'

'Gafiz, that sounds Persian, like Persian love poetry: love for God, nota bene. And how did our rogue Kolya betray her, what do you mean by that?'

'Well, not with me of course; I'd finished with him sexually long before then. You know that. I had other relationships.'

She took a cigarette out of her case and lit it. Mandelstam, his health fragile, politely turned down her offer.

'But at some point, Larissa found out he was having another affair at the same time as sleeping with her – and she realised in the most unpleasant way: because as soon as the Bolsheviks had changed the marriage laws, he divorced me to marry Anna Nikolayevna Engelhardt.'

'Of course, I'd forgotten poor Anna...'

'I've read all the letters Larissa wrote to him – my interpretation is that Kolya had promised to marry her too. But then he picked Engelhardt in the end. Well, that was bound to hurt.'

'Do you know how long it went on between them?'

'A long time. The first letter is from the autumn of 1910. And everything in it indicates that they'd known each other some time.'

'1910... But that's the year you married!'

'It is indeed. I remember Kolya having to teach a literary course – before he set off on his trip to Abyssinia – at a girls' lyceum in Petersburg. I presume that was where they met.'

'But, let me think... How old was Larissa then?'

'She must have been fifteen.'

'Heavens... Do you think they had sexual relations at the time?'

'I don't believe so. Her letters make it clear that it was platonic, to begin with. She wrote to him in quick succession. She sent him her poems. They exchanged tendernesses. Kisses. But they didn't become properly close until 1917.'

'No! During the revolution!'

'Kolya was back from Paris but still in the military. He came back from the war and was barely ever home. Lev was six at the time and a wonderful little lad; he'd been so looking forward to his father and then he rarely saw him. He would come home, take off his uniform, take a bath,

and half an hour later he'd be in the droshky into town – "just for dinner," as he always used to say. He went to her instead of talking to his poor son, letting him sit on his lap even once.'

'But how do you know it was her, Larissa?'

'She uses certain formulations, in her letters, I mean, that lead me to conclude they were meeting in the military guesthouse that used to be opposite number ten Gorokhovaya.'

'You mean the Cheka, opposite the Queen of Spades?'

'You'll have to ask Punin that,' she replied. 'I have no interest in the mythological map of this swamp metropolis that none of you can seem to get enough of.'

'What do you mean, "none of you"?'

'How ridiculous – what have we been talking about for the past hour? You! You men. Chaps. Fellows. Men. Seducers.'

'But that's... I didn't come here to have a fight with you.'

'Then why won't you give me a little warmth?'

'But I'm trying to. Forgive my phlegmatism, Anoush dearest,' said Mandelstam, focusing his full attention on his soulmate.

'Well – I'd say it would be very important, for the sake of the Gumilev scholars of the future, for us to get our hands on his letters to Larissa Reissner. All those left in her papers now that she's gone.'

'I agree. What a good thing that she wrote it herself: "In the event of my death all letters will return to you" – and so on,' Mandelstam quoted quick-wittedly. He rose from the table and sat down on the vaguely Asian sofa, as wide and unshapely as it was, removed his rather too tight shoes, their leather wet through, and sank back in his stockinged feet.

'I agree. The question is – who do we know in Moscow who could represent our interest in Gumilev's letters to Reissner?'

From the corridor of Punin's apartment, the two of them now heard the audio form of the ceremony accompanying the return of the man of the house: the ringing at the door, a muffled exchange of words between Punin and his wife, plus the high voice of his daughter Ira, who had joined them to welcome her papa back from his daily business. Shortly after that came a knock at the study door.

'Come in,' the poetess called, and Mandelstam watched with amazement as her face, instead of brightening at the sight of her lover – whose apartment she was in and whose study she

had flooded with her first husband's papers – took on a gloomy, albeit aristocratic expression. She and Punin exchanged kisses, then the man of the house held out his hand to Mandelstam.

'Ossip Emilyewich, glad to see you. Glad to see you. Are you staying for supper? In half an hour. Not that there's much of it, just potatoes and a bit of herring. I did get hold of two bottles of vodka, though.'

At the kitchen table, then, Anna's son Lev joined them, a pretty fifteen-year-old boy who had spent the afternoon at school and then the library. Mandelstam noticed him keeping his eyes down shyly. He said not a word, eating and then quickly withdrawing with a book on medieval Russian history to his bed, separated off from the corridor by a curtain. Both Punin's wife and little Ira watched him go with visible dislike. He seemed not to be popular here, the son of the gloomy monarchist executed by the Cheka.

Punin had talked about recent events at the porcelain factory over supper. One of the faience painters, an elderly man, completely unpolitical, a master of the old Russian style of decoration, appeared to have been arrested for no obvious reason. The department head had gone to ask the Cheka about him, yesterday, and they had kept him there. A certain sense of insecurity had settled over the factory, or at least the design department.

Then – little Irina and Punin's long-suffering wife having withdrawn likewise – they finally came to the subject of Larissa Reissner's death. Punin had heard about it earlier that day. Like many other old Leningraders, he knew the family of course: Ekaterina and Mikhail Reissner, Bolsheviks from day one. Reissner's comrades had nicknamed him 'the Count' for his indestructible aristocratic habits. He was considered one of the country's finest experts on constitutional law – it was no coincidence that Lenin had later commissioned him to draft the Soviet constitution. There were some, admittedly, who knew him from before 1905, who claimed the leftist Count Reissner had been secretly working for the tsar's Okhrana all along.

'There are rumours on all the banks and all the tributaries of St Petersburg, about every one of the Old Bolsheviks. What I know for sure is that the Reissners financed their daughter's journal *Rudin*. I myself witnessed them selling off the family silver to cover the costs. They spent the last of their fortune on Larissa and the journal. I published several pieces in it myself. Always got paid.'

'I remember.'

'*Rudin* was the only voice in the whole Russian empire vehemently opposed to the war. The only one. Back then in 1914 everyone started writing war propaganda, utterly convinced. Let's

be honest: Gumilev, Blok, even me, I admit it. I wrote that stuff and then stopped, but the wave of patriotism tore me along in its wake. Nonetheless – young Larissa Reissner! She took a stand immediately, her clenched fist aloft – against the war, while the rest of us were still cheering and clapping.'

'Slim, tall, in an extravagant grey suit, English-style tailoring, in a pale blouse with a tie fastened like a man's – there's even a painting by Chekhonin, where she has a beautiful melancholy look on her face,' Punin gushed. He topped up all their vodka glasses now that they had finished eating.

'Even though I knew she was sleeping with my husband, I shook hands with her when she introduced herself. She approached me in the Stray Dog. Facial features carved out of marble. There was something non-Russian, something cold and arrogant in her eyes…' Akhmatova remembered sadly.

'The last time I saw her she was already a commissar. She had an office in a marvellous room of the Admiral's Palace. I was really impressed. In the space of a few years she'd gone from a student publishing a leftist journal to the political commissar of a whole fleet.'

'She was a beautiful, difficult and spectacular German beauty,' Akhmatova noted with audible pain in her voice, the pain of memory nonetheless mingled with a touch of relief. 'But now she's paid for her deeds.'

'How can you say that, Anna Andreyevna?' Punin murmured. 'She was only a girl back then.'

'The girl every man wanted, so they could fuck her. Don't pretend otherwise. It's the truth. All of you sacrificed the best publication spots to her, adored her – and wrote on the gigantic literary firmament of Petrograd: "I love you, Larissa, I can think of nothing but you." Even Maxim Gorki was in love with her!'

'True. But after Gumilev finished with her and married his young lover, she turned radical. Gumilev was appalled.'

'And then later she had that writing workshop in the Kronstadt sailors' club. Terrible stuff, but I have to admit there were sentences in there now and then like from another world. Real Russian, but as impossible to grasp as the departed trains at the Finland Station,' said Punin, the vodka showing considerable effect.

'I heard that Larissa Reissner was on board the *Aurora* with her sailors,' Mandelstam interjected, shuddering at the thought and yet unable to close his mind to the dramatic scene

playing out in his imagination. 'I heard it was her who gave the command to fire at the Winter Palace, Katharine the Great's green jewel.'

'The shelling of the Winter Palace? You mean that was Larissa Reissner?' Punin was amazed.

'A myth,' Akhmatova murmured, lighting a cigarette only to add: 'But no matter if it was her or not who made the sailors on the *Aurora* do what they did – we need to send a telegramme to Moscow tonight.'

They drank, smoked and honed a message to send, but the three Leningraders in the kitchen of the small apartment in the rear building of an Italian palace eventually realised it was absolutely impossible to send the burial committee a sympathy telegramme and at the same time ask for the release of Gumilev's letters, which were – perhaps – among the dead woman's papers. What was to be done?

Ossip Emilyevich, having naturally offered to act as his good friend's courier, left the Fountain House apartment in the end with two messages instead of one. He would send the first directly to the *Izvestia* editorial office, where the burial committee was guarding the corpse in its open coffin and planning the funeral; the other telegram was to go to his and Anna Akhmatova's best literary friend in Moscow, always an ally of theirs: Boris Leonidovich Pasternak. He too had known Reissner well, was a marvellous poet and therefore the perfect person to speak to Larissa's father or brother at the next day's funeral about the delicate subject of her papers. Perhaps also her official husband, Raskolnikov, with whom it was said she had not been together for some time, admittedly. Most recently, and also a matter for consideration, she had been Karl Radek's lover.

It was of course dark already when he stepped out onto Foundry Boulevard, but with all that good vodka in his belly, he weathered the icy fog creeping up from the Neva, the Fontanka and all the other ninety rivers and canals of Leningrad rather well. The streetlamps glowed dimly, and beneath one opposite stood two Red Army men with their rifles shouldered and grim but bored looks on their faces. What were they doing there –guarding the street? Protecting the Nordic snowfall?

Mandelstam hurried past them, pulling his crumpled hat low and striding away as fast as he could. So much came to mind, the theme of all their lives and the only one of his work – the clattering, gathering and redispersing passage of time. How rarely one took an opportunity to assure oneself of it. As a tram slithered past him in the foggy darkness of night, he thought of his ignominious friend Kolya's last verse, his last poem before he faced the execution commando,

doing nothing unusual, merely what was commonplace in those days. What was it Gumilev had written?

But what are we to do with sunset fires?
With joys that can't be eaten, drunk or kissed?
And what are we to do with deathless verse?
We stand and watch — as mysteries slip past.

Just as some boy too young to know of love
will leave his play to gaze, his heart on fire,
at maidens swimming in a lake, and gaze
and gaze, tormented by obscure desire;

or as within the gloom of ancient jungle
some earthbound beast once slithered from its lair
with wing buds on its back, still tightly closed,
and let out cries of impotent despair;

so year on year — how long, Lord, must we wait? —
beneath the surgeon's knife of art and nature,
our flesh is wasted and our spirit howls
as one more sense moves slowly to creation.

Chapter 12

ON NEROBERG HILL
Wiesbaden, *August 1923*

In the spring of 1923, the German Reich entered its next bitter crisis, which seemed to grow greater by the hour. The French and the Belgians had occupied the Ruhr at the start of the year, whereupon the Reich government under Chancellor Cuno, already clamped into the Treaty of Versailles' harsh debt regime, encouraged a campaign of passive resistance known as the 'Ruhr struggle'. To pay the wages of millions of striking workers in the Ruhr, the government printed money. This measure, combined with the simultaneous fall in tax income, tipped the entire state budget out of balance. The reichsmark soon broke all negative records, now worth less than ever before, and since paper is patient and numbers know no borders, the Germans were soon carrying millions of marks around in their pockets, weighing only a few grams.

Tania, meanwhile, completed her violin studies at the Mendelssohn Conservatory with distinction, and soon obtained an understudy post in the Gewandhaus Orchestra. Women from all over the world had been coming to Leipzig for decades, since they could study instruments and composition there and nowhere else. Yet finding a position as a musician or respect as an artist was still an exception. Most women music graduates restricted themselves to teaching for the rest of their lives. Not Tania Kaplan.

She was allowed to step in whenever one of the gentlemen was prevented from playing. She had recently substituted a few times in a row, in fact. Had she continued along that path, reliable and inconspicuous, she might one day have been offered the permanent post she deserved, making her – after the harp, which had been played by women since back in 1866 – the first woman violinist in the history of the world's first non-royal orchestra.

The fact that that did not happen was related not only to Tania's enthusiasm for the formation of orchestral sound, but also and especially to a chronic lack of punctuality on the part of the assistant to the head conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, a man much admired by Tania. The assistant, a certain Klopke, considered himself a genius but cultivated the inexterminable vice of making people wait for him. When, for the umpteenth time, the wave-like shock of his brilliantined black hair failed to make an appearance after the requisite quarter of an hour and the venerated

orchestra's musicians lapsed into giggling, murmuring and chattering at a volume worthy of a kindergarten, Tania bit her lip as so often. Then she rose to her feet, clutching her instrument and its bow, and strode from her violinist's seat at the back all the way to the conductor's rostrum.

She began speaking, but since no one made the slightest effort to listen to her, she allowed herself to tap the bow against the rostrum, at first fairly lightly, then with more force.

A few faces from the woodwind section turned her way with interest. She tapped again, a little more firmly, but since nothing more happened and she was about to break her bow, she put her violin to her chin and played a few rousing bars from Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto in E Minor, so piercingly that all heads actually turned to look at her.

'My dear colleagues,' she called out, assuming the friendliest smile she could muster, 'if I recall rightly, we had difficulties with the opening at the last rehearsal. We all heard that there were rhythmic… inaccuracies in the woodwind and…' – she was interrupted by the trombonists, but forged on – 'and in the brass section. Come on, let's all make the best use of our time and go through that part again. Our Maestro will be pleased with us.'

And Tania had prepared herself, raising the slim but strong hands inherited from her father and, like a helmswoman in the captain's absence, seizing not only the controls but also the authority to set the course and give instructions.

'But please, violins as well: pay attention to bars thirteen and fourteen, that's where we had the most difficulties last time. And now please, everyone, concentration.' As if a miracle had occurred, there was no one in the orchestra who now thought it in any way strange that Tania Kaplan, the understudy violinist, was about to conduct the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Tania had her eyes closed, the score in front of her, and was utterly concentrated. A few seconds later, once she could feel precisely that the orchestra was ready to obey her beat, she sensed, sensed very clearly a guiding current of energy unfurling from the nerve-endings in her fingertips, flowing out of her and leaping across to the orchestra members, and she sensed it returning to her and something inside her opening up: a precious organ awakening, very close to her heart but not her heart. This musical organ now suddenly fluttered for joy, lightning flashed through her body, she counted in the tempo she felt was right, and indeed, in actual fact, what a moment: the orchestra – starting with oboes and woodwind – began to play, slowly, as if a wanderer's gaze were rising over mysterious, mist-swathed water.

It was just as Tania had begun, thanks to the assistant conductor's absence, to do what she had long been dreaming of, namely conducting a symphony orchestra, that the artistic director and

his deputy happened to pass by, showing a senior civil servant from the Saxon culture ministry around the Neues Concerthaus between Beethovenstrasse and Mozartstrasse.

It was at that moment that the first bars of Tchaikovsky's Pathétique Symphony rang out – and with such brilliance and precision! The gentlemen raised their eyebrows in admiration, and the deputy artistic director praised the assistant conductor Klopke in expert words, confirming that his engagement had definitely been the right decision. Maestro Furtwängler had been against it, he explained; he did not want an assistant, but frequent rehearsals were essential; they were preparing for a tour of Switzerland! The artistic director made an appreciative show of the joys of someone calculating the income from the tour. Swiss francs! Two short syllables of pure salaciousness.

The civil servant was thrilled. The eavesdropped performance, he said, was as emotive, yet as radiant and clear, as if it were conducted by Master Furtwängler himself. Could they not play fly on the wall and pop their heads around the door quietly to watch the lauded assistant at work? At that very instant, Klopke strode in through the door of the Neues Concerthaus, coattails flying, and reaped amazed stares from the three men who had just been about to admire his achievements. Klopke himself listened incredulously to the music that ought to be coming about under his instruction. All four men experienced a moment of astonishment, incomprehension and head-shaking. Who on earth had the temerity to stand at the rostrum and conduct Tchaikovsky in there?

Six weeks have passed since this five-minute revolution, when the first woman ever to conduct the Gewandhaus Orchestra receives a telegram from her beloved cousin Larissa in Wiesbaden. It is mid-August and Leipzig is perspiring beneath a leaden roof of sultry heat. The water quality in the canals has reached a worrying state. The messenger boy who brings Tania the missive doffs his cap, its rim darkened by the sweat that has also soaked his collarless shirt and simple waistcoat. She puts two hundred thousand marks into it, uncertain whether that is enough; three million are now equivalent to one dollar, after all. The dollar has assumed the authority of the Reich president in Germany, or perhaps greater. Tania is often amazed at how routine it has become to follow the day's exchange rate, almost beginning to distinguish it between morning, noon and night.

From the Kaplans' salon float the rhythmically strained attempts of one of her mother's piano students to reach the end of a Chopin étude, until said end comes rather too suddenly. Maria Valentinovna's gentle voice points out a number of mistakes, mildly chiding the girl, and then they both laugh and Tania hears the familiar sound of Maria and her disciple – she thinks she saw earlier

that it was eight-year-old Pauline – skipping around the room and performing a kind of playful gymnastics. Pauline finishes up with a giggling roly-poly before they return to the piano.

Once the teacher has given a few instructions in a soft but firm voice, the playing begins anew. And in actual fact – it is slightly smoother, a definite improvement!

Tania, who learned all her musical basics from her mother, of course, is a great admirer of Maria Valentinovna's teaching skills. She really is good with children.

She takes Larissa's telegram to her room, where she is currently working on the proofs of a substantial work on art history to be published by one of Leipzig's many presses. Her fiancé Ernst has got her work as a proofreader. The pay is bad, even though it adds up to many millions; but the work is at least regular and she can do it from home, meaning she has plenty of opportunities to practise her violin and prepare herself for audition invitations that have not yet begun to arrive.

With the paper knife she uses to cut open the print sheets for correction, she opens the telegram and reads Larissa's plea for help. Her cousin has been staying at the Clinic and Spa Hotel Neroberg in Wiesbaden for some time, and cordially asks her beloved Tanyusha to pay her a visit. She is in difficulties, she writes, and it is important that Tania comes, as soon as possible, please! 1000 kisses, Lyalya.

Tania presumes Larissa's stay in Wiesbaden is to do with the malaria from which her cousin has sadly been suffering for some years now.

Early that evening, Maria Valentinovna and her daughter swiftly conclude that Tania will take the first train from Leipzig's central station the next day. The household kitty can narrowly accommodate her expenses, despite bursting at the seams with million-mark notes. She takes her travel budget to the station, buys the ticket and then packs a small suitcase, back home. She writes to her fiancé, currently spending a few days in Weimar where a design and architecture school by the name of Bauhaus is opening its doors to visitors for the first time. Tania takes the letter to Ernst's studio apartment in the artists' house on Nikischplatz. Despite not knowing whether she will be in Wiesbaden for long, she decides to take her violin along on the trip. There is some risk entailed; if the valuable instrument were to be lost it would be near-impossible to replace. With that in mind, Tania stows her small-calibre Mauser pistol in her handbag; she spent two years practising for her firearms licence at the local marksmen's society. Tania is a reader of Romain Rolland and a convinced pacifist, but that does not change the fact that the streets, alleys, trams, trains and stations of Germany's cities are full of gangsters, pickpockets and poverty-stricken

people resorting to crime. The next morning, not only is her violin case attached by a chain to her wrist, but she also feels reassured by the weapon as she boards the train shortly before six, taking her via Erfurt to Frankfurt am Main, where she will have to change one more time.

In the early afternoon – unmolested and having made no use of her gun – she disembarks from a narrow-gauge railway on Neroberg hill, surrounded by a lush botanical garden. It is noticeably cooler up there than down in the busy spa town. Dotted with bay windows and onion domes, the L-shaped hotel is towered over by a tall square protrusion that lends it a castle-like air, in contrast to the large windows. The building is an architectural pot-pourri but looks magnificent nonetheless. Tania enters the lobby through a cupolaed entrance flanked by classical pillars. Rather intimidated by the rarefied atmosphere, she makes a beeline for the reception, where the concierge gives her a knowing nod at first. And yet she provokes only amazement when she enquires about Madame Reissner.

'I do apologise, madam, but I don't understand,' the receptionist stutters, looking at her awkwardly and then looking away again – a tall man with a thin moustache, his posture slightly bent. A strange moment until Tania realises he has taken her for her cousin.

Eventually, she locates her doppelgänger in the hotel's conservatory. A small forest of palm trees has been planted in polished brass tubs in the spacious glass construction, its doors opened onto the park to grant entry to a pleasant breeze. Somewhere further away, there seems to be an aviary of good-tempered canaries. There is more shade than sun in the sun room, and that is exactly as it should be.

There she finds Larissa sitting alone at one of the elegant round tables, books beside her, one of them open, leaning over a manuscript, hard at work.

Larissa hears Tania coming now; she turns around. Tania is almost shocked – of course Larissa is still stunningly beautiful, but in her cheeks and eyes she sees deep exhaustion. The cousins embrace and against Tania's expectations, Larissa hugs her tight, like someone who spends their time riding and swimming. She seems to be trembling with energy.

'Ah, zladenkaya,' Larissa exclaims, 'my darling!' and kisses Tania's face clutched between her hands. 'How beautiful you are!'

'And you smell so good, Lyalya! You're still wearing Rose France – I haven't smelled it since last time we saw each other, when was that? Wonderful! How lovely to see you!'

They both have to take a breath before they release their embrace and look into each other's eyes.

'Oh, I'm sorry, my dear, what nonsense I'm talking. How are you feeling?' Tania brushes a strand of hair off her cousin's face and then strokes her cheek. 'What's the matter?'

What is the matter? Answering Tania's question in full would mean Larissa having to put into words the expansion of the revolution, of her fight for a free world and her own life, describing the maelstrom that has seized her since she finally understood, in Afghanistan, which forces rule the world, hold it together and at the same time repeatedly plunge it into raging wars.

Then again, she has to tell her cousin about her doubts and concerns over the developments in Moscow and the young Soviet Union. About the newly wealthy proponents of Lenin's New Economic Policy in the fancy restaurants and the poverty on the streets, about the hope-filled yearnings of the revolutionary youth around the world, waiting so urgently for the signal for the revolution to continue. Which was why she had decided to leave Raskolnikov, only to find herself again, as if by a miracle, in an encounter with another man – the most mysterious Bolshevik of them all: Karl Radek.

'In Kabul, I came across notes made by a German officer, concerning the liberation of India from British rule. I went in search of him in Moscow and that was how I met Radek. He was able to help me, but he has all sorts of other ideas. He completely overwhelmed me.'

Tania has a fine ear for what is behind Larissa's words. 'Is there something... more between you and this Radek?'

No, Larissa says, nothing has happened between them yet, but she knows it will as soon as they next see each other. She has rarely been able to communicate so well with someone she has only just met. It goes far beyond personal matters, though.

Radek is her commissioner now; he is a Comintern specialist for Germany, and here in the German republic now rid of its royals, where a cup of coffee costs twice as much in the evening than the morning and where the streets of the cities are increasingly becoming a frontline between the right and the left, agitators, reactionaries and revolutionaries – here in what is perhaps Europe's most contradictory country, stagnating after a lost war and in which every citizen, no matter their political leanings, is yearning for revenge and revision, the communist revolution is to take place this very year. The German revolution – the most important event to prompt radical change in international politics – or rather, to readjust it. And Larissa, who lived for so long in Germany and speaks and writes perfect German – this was Radek's idea – is to be the literary voice of that revolution. She will describe the events to the workers of Russia, thirsting for news as they are, as

if they were in the very midst of the turmoil. And alongside that activity, she will relay important information on the state of affairs to the Comintern leadership.

Yet all this, this world-moving frenzy that has taken hold of her once again, is only one part of her life. She has other things to tell her sisterly cousin. But how? She can find no suitable transition.

'Tanyusha, I have to tell you – I have had a baby.'

It is the first time Larissa has spoken these words. She had not even told anyone she was expecting – or hardly anyone. Now, hearing herself say something so unheard, she surprises herself and is endlessly grateful to Tania for being the person she can speak to, at last.

'When?'

'Two weeks ago.'

'You mean here?'

'Yes, of course. This is a very good private clinic. It's a boy. I've called him Arian.'

'Arian. What a lovely name. But heavens, Lyalya, where is he now?'

'Don't worry. He's asleep, fed and dry in his cradle.'

'I really don't know what to say. Who's...?'

'The father? Raskolnikov, I presume.'

'You presume? Have you had... affairs?'

'An affair is what you have when you're locked away. That was never an issue between us. But everything changed in Afghanistan. Raskolnikov turned into a petty bourgeois.'

'So you don't know for sure who the father is?'

'I'm sure that Arian was conceived in Afghanistan. I knew from the very first moment that I was pregnant again.'

And now that Tania understands her, it all comes flooding out of Larissa; she tells her about the past two and a half years in Kabul, the nerve-jangling running battle they fought from their residency by the river with the all-powerful British embassy and by the side of the emir, her relationship with Raskolnikov.

'You know, Tanyusha, I loved him and I'll always respect him. But after those years in Kabul, I simply can't live with him any longer. And I don't want to, either.'

'How did it come to this between you?'

'Afghanistan is a hot country. Vodka is not the right refreshment in the heat, if you understand what I mean. He simply wouldn't stop. Went to rack and ruin. And with my malaria

and the pressure of our diplomatic situation, I kept falling ill from pure exhaustion. I had two miscarriages. In all that time, Raskolnikov was like a millstone around my neck, as they say. I had to take care of him despite everything else, and of embassy business. The correspondence, the staff. And then...' Larissa breaks off, lowers her eyes, wondering whether to go on, but brings herself to tell Tania after all.

'Raskolnikov was always jealous, but when he'd been drinking he even resorted to violence.'

'He beat you?'

'Often, with a riding crop. He's such a huge man. He'd grab me, tear off my clothes and whip me. He'd always feel sorry later... When I realised I was pregnant again, I swore to have the child on my own.'

'All alone?'

Tania eyes her cousin in horror. Larissa, though, having simply said the truth, is a picture of perfect calm.

'Are you saying nobody knows about it? Auntie Ekaterina? Goga? Uncle Mikhail? No one?'

'Apart from one person, Karl Radek; I confided in him. But I didn't tell anyone else, and nobody noticed, or I don't think they did. I avoided being seen in public. Wore Afghan clothing and baggy dresses. When I could no longer hide it, I came here. Radek has a contact to one of the senior doctors. Officially, I'm here on a rest cure for my malaria. Everyone in Moscow understood. Raskolnikov and I recuperated in Sochi that time at the state's expense. You know, after his pneumonia.'

'But isn't it incredibly expensive here in Wiesbaden? With the inflation?'

'The inflation is the best thing that could have happened to me. I've been given dollars. With dollars in your pocket, Germany is the most comfortable place in the world, right now.'

'Been given dollars? By whom?'

'The anti-capitalist revolution is not a national matter. Our struggle began in the Russian empire, and that's where we were victorious. Only just, but still. But that can't be the end of it. It will continue elsewhere. It must continue elsewhere, otherwise our enemies will destroy us: the British and Americans. The White forces. The fascists. The loyal soldiers of worldwide capital. It was only in Afghanistan that I finally understood we have to think differently, entirely differently. In concrete and utterly international terms. As Lenin always said, when he could still speak. And the most important country for the world revolution, at this moment in time, is Germany.'

'That's why you're really here in Wiesbaden? For a violent coup in Germany? With your new-born son along for the ride.'

'Ach, Tanyusha. I love Arian more than anything in the world. And with love comes responsibility, that's only natural. That's why we're here in the world. Would you like to see him?'

Quotes:

Ossip Mandelstam poem, tr. Rupert Moreton

Anna Akhmatova poem, tr. Lenore Mayhew and William McNaughton

Nikolai Gumilev poem, tr. Robert Chandler