Ash Heap of History: June 9, 1982

By Mihail Iossel

**SHORTLY AFTER** two o’clock in the morning, in night’s easy dusk, unable to sleep because of too many difficult thoughts in my head, wearing an old quilted jacket against the thin chill in the air, I was seated on a rickety wooden bench on the narrow patch of lakeshore at our family’s summer house in K—a village in the formerly Finnish territory of Karelia, some one hundred kilometers due northwest of Leningrad—with my VEF-Spidola portable radio in my lap and a neighbor’s large, piebald, lame-legged mutt named Garrincha lying on the grass a couple of meters away, gnawing on a soup bone I’d brought out of the house for him, as circumspectly as possible, so as not to awaken Grandmother. The dog was growling a bit from an excess of pleasure, his eyes closed. “You’re overdoing it,” I told him quietly, half whispering, because the night was very still and sounds carried far in it, traveling instantaneously across the placid water.

There was, inexplicably, a glint of hard, cold red light out there, on the other, uninhabited shore of the lake, a good two kilometers away. I couldn’t fathom what might be the source of that unblinking, fixed red dot of keen luminescence. It couldn’t be a bonfire, for it wasn’t breathing, either contracting or expanding—and one would have to be almost insanely reckless, anyway, to risk starting a fire in that gloomy wilderness of heightened potential flammability. Still, there had to be a human being there, a stranger, in night’s loneliest hour: someone brazenly unmindful of the border guards’ constant surveillance of the entire immediate area. For an instant, I pictured that someone—a black-clad man in a balaclava standing there calmly, across the lake’s ashen-gray mirror, just off the jagged shoreline of variously sized granite boulders, amid the dense forest of tall firs and pines, and regarding the tiny hunched form of the obviously insignificant person on the old bench on the opposite shore, me, coolly and dispassionately, through powerful infrared binoculars, attempting without much interest, merely out of idle curiosity or improbable momentary boredom, to figure out who I was; and yet, at the same time, somehow, uncannily, knowing already all there was to know about me: just an ordinary young Soviet Jew, an unsuccessful applicant for an emigre visa (and thus, effectively, a self-declared would-be traitor to the Motherland), an electrical engineer by training and lowly security guard in the Roller-Coaster Unit of the Krestovsky Island Amusement Sector of the Leningrad Central Park of Culture and Leisure by nominal current employment (one had to be gainfully employed in some way to stay out of legal trouble in the Soviet land), an aspiring writer with no hopes of ever seeing his modest efforts in the pages of any “official” literary journal, and . . . What else was I at the moment? Someone who had been on nonspeaking terms with his father—one of the country’s leading experts on the electromagnetic protection of Soviet military submarines—for more than a year, ever since applying for that émigré visa. Someone who fled the city on the spur of the moment the day before, in a pretty cowardly fashion, frankly, to escape the mounting stress of being continuously followed around over the past week, on his (well, my) way from his apartment building to the metro station and back, by two burly, pancake-faced characters in black nylon raincoats, clearly some low-level, part-time hoodlums from *the organs,* whose purpose, at least for the time being, was to intimidate rather than to hurt physically. I was someone, in short, who, while sitting on the lopsided wooden bench overlooking the sleeping lake at his family’s summer house in the night, next to a large dog with a bone, had no idea what it was exactly that *the organs* wanted from him and why, instead of being followed around, he couldn’t just be permitted to leave the damn country, disappear for good, even despite—but alas, therein lay the old rub—his father’s top-notch level of secret security clearance.

Nothing too joyous, dear foreign spy.

The thought that the strange, sharp red dot of light across the lake could suggest the presence of a foreign spy there, on the opposite shore, was in equal measure exciting and preposterous. Of course, it was a thoroughly childish notion. But then, on the other hand, why not? Who or what, but my own fearful sense of reality, could stop me from entertaining it at this hour? One could envision any number of unlikely dramatic scenarios unfolding in this singular, deceptively quiet, peripheral geographic locale. The border with Finland and the rest of the non-Soviet world was not far off, after all. In fact, it was maddeningly close. K happened to be the last train station accessible without a special permit from the *competent authorities.* Beyond it, the no-man’s-land of the border-bound “neutral zone” began—the sovereign domain of severely vigilant border guards. There could be absolutely no realistic hope for anyone with his two feet on the ground to manage traversing that wide, unpredictable, electronics-saturated space undetected and just walk into Finland (where the hard-hearted Finnish border guards, incidentally, as per the accommodationist agreement between the two countries, would just apprehend and turn the prematurely jubilant escapee right back over to their Soviet counterparts; so there also was that), unless . . . well, unless one possessed the fantastical capacity of making himself invisible, which the most advanced foreign spyware technology might actually, conceivably, have already started making available to the capitalist world’s most highly prized James Bonds, on a strictly limited basis.

Oh, how I wished I could be invisible! The things I would do, the places I would go, if granted that priceless gift! Suddenly dissolving into thin air right before the piggish eyes of those two goons in black nylon raincoats, I would just pivot on a dime and walk right up to them, laugh obnoxiously, furiously in their confused, stupid faces, and . . . I would kick them in their friggin’ balls, that’s right, first one of them and then the other, with my trained legs of a once-promising teenage soccer player. Yes! And then . . . then, why not, I’d make my ominous, invisible way clear across the city, to the Smolny Palace, where the office of comrade Grigory Vassilyevich Romanov, the elfin, bovine, and proudly anti-Semitic Stalinist head of the Leningrad Regional Party Committee was, and I would saunter straight in there, passing invisibly through rows and concentric circles of uniformed and plainclothes militia and KGB guards, and once in there, I . . . would walk right up to Grigory Vassilyevich and also kick him in his tiny, shriveled balls a few times, with all my might. How he would scream! Oh, the joy! And then I . . .

I told myself to stop hyperventilating and exclaiming inwardly, in my thoughts. In order to calm down, I took a few deep breaths and turned on the VEF-Spidola in my lap. The green cat’s eye of its dial lit up, and instantly the night filled with the crackling static of the unimaginable outer, non-Soviet world’s incomprehensible enormity. I nudged the dial knob blindly, lightly a few times—and the familiar, methodical, crisp voice of a BBC newsreader, with his too-correct Russian, came on. Here, so far away from the city, in a sparsely populated area of sprawling coniferous forests and lovely granite-hedged lakes and generally disinterested, apolitical human inhabitants, *the organs* saw no reason to jam the frequencies of “enemy voices” in Russian, as they did in every corner of every large Soviet urban area, filling the hapless listeners’ ears with squalls of triumphantly offensive, otherworldly bestial howling. Still, I needed to be cautious here too, all the same: the night air enveloping me did carry sounds, both across the hushed, woodsy land and over the lake’s perfect surface, with extreme clarity and at the speed of an electric current passing through a live wire, causing any randomly, nonchalantly uttered word to acquire the sudden currency of a shouted one. Also, not altogether impossibly, there could be a foreign spy, represented by that needle-sharp dot of red light, standing amid the tall trees just across the lake, ever so quietly and sinisterly; and who could possibly tell what might be transpiring in his capitalist-imperialist head. There were other people too—our neighbors—either asleep or pointlessly awake, sober or drunk in their log cabins along the shore. There also was Grandmother, a light sleeper and early riser, back in the house, some fifty meters away. And there, of course, were the border guards everywhere, hiding in the dark. Even the dog, Garrincha, spread on the grass by my feet, busy as he was with his soup bone, lifted his oddly shaped, Rorschach-blot-like head in a momentary alarm. “It’s okay, just the enemy voices,” I whispered to him, decreasing the sound.

I brought the VEF-Spidola close to my ear, leaning into it, to listen to the real, unvarnished news of the world. Alas, at that particular hour, the BBC’s fare wasn’t much different from what I or any other Soviet citizen could get on our own by listening to our wonderful Soviet radio or from our excellent, super-informative Soviet newspapers come morning. This simply was because the “enemy” news only diverged in any meaningful way from our own, Soviet ones, when the Soviet Union itself, along with our brotherly Warsaw-Pact satellites, came under discussion. Only then would the “enemy voices” start being seriously worth listening to. Only then would they start to matter in a meaningful way. Because it was common knowledge, of course, among us the Soviet people, that all the bad things in the world happened exclusively in the world of capitalism-imperialism, while all the good and positive ones only in our own, Soviet world . . .

Still, I listened, craning my neck and pressing my ear to the cool yellow plastic of VEF-Spidola’s box. A tragedy in Brazil, world’s undisputed premier soccer superpower: An airliner, in dense fog, had crashed into a mountainside there earlier in the afternoon. Everyone aboard was killed instantly. It was terrible, just awful. To be a Brazilian—and die, and in such a horrible way. Those poor people. Merely not being a Soviet citizen was not enough—that lucky accident of birth alone did not provide one with a blanket guarantee from the final misfortune of being mortal. People were people everywhere. Death didn’t discriminate among them based on their, you know, governing societal ideologies . . . Well, anyway. There also was a war going on between England and Argentina, over some practically uninhabited islands in the remote part of the Atlantic. Strange, odd, I thought. Like we still were living in the Middle Ages or something. Or as if those two capitalist-imperialist countries were, like, like *us:* the Soviet Union and China, for instance, back in 1969. But that was a whole separate story and line of reminiscences . . . Only four days were left until the opening of the world soccer championship in Spain. Yes, indeed. They didn’t have to tell me *that.* I was aware. I couldn’t wait. I was going to be back in the city by then, hopefully. One couldn’t rely on the quality of TV reception in K anyway. The thing was, due to the extreme closeness of Finland, one could in theory watch Finnish television here too—and in order to make sure that wouldn’t happen, the organs basically obliterated all television reception in the area, including the three main Soviet channels, unpatriotically and even anti-Sovietically, so to speak, enough. I only needed a couple days’ worth of a breather here anyway. Maybe when I got back it would turn out those two goons in black raincoats no longer were under orders to follow me around and would have disappeared from my life for good. Sure, why not—and pigs could fly too. Beautifully and mournfully, in circles. Or maybe they just had been a figment of my imagination, those two, to begin with? Well, no. They had not. I wasn’t paranoid. I saw them with my very own two eyes, every single day over the past week. Following me from my apartment building to the Park of Victory metro station—and back. What the hell did they want from me? Why couldn’t they just leave me alone, let me have that damn visa already, if they hated me so much? Who was I to them? Nobody, a nonentity! No one! A human dot, infinitesimally small . . .

I pushed the dial knob once more and right away heard the already intimately familiar voice of the American President Ronald Reagan. Oh, yes. Yes, baby. It was just instantly recognizable, with that rich, soft, mellifluous, velveteen quality to it. The Voice of America wavelength, then, this was. Reagan was giving some sort of an important speech, delivering some lengthy talk, speaking with his customary passion and conviction. It was too bad, just very unfortunate, that whatever he was saying was almost completely indecipherable to me. In some deeply perverse sense, it was a good thing too that I was in no immediate or long-term danger of being allowed to leave the Soviet Union and go to America, because my oral comprehension of the language of Reagan and Shakespeare was virtually nonexistent. I could read English texts just fine, with a dictionary, and I even translated, just for my own enjoyment and to the best of my ability (badly, most likely), some literary American texts, such as the random poems from a book of contemporary American poetry bought on one accidental occasion from a familiar *fartsovshchik* (black-marketeer)—but grasping the essential gist of Reagan’s speech on the Voice of America in the night was beyond my linguistic capacities.

But oh, I loved the sound of American English! It was so beautiful! So . . . unlike Russian, which, ultimately, was like air to me: colorless, transparent, and received free of charge. Whether the air you breathed was clean or dirty, it still was just the only one you got to breathe, at any given moment, inescapably; and it was indeed totally free, because you didn’t have to pay for it, it was yours from birth, an innate gift, unasked for. It was impossible for me not to understand Russian, no matter how often I wished this had been the case. I could never get away from it, even if I wanted to, which I didn’t. But American English? It was so . . . well, different. It was like . . . like maybe listening to, you know, mulled wine laced with honey running slowly over the hot stones, if that made any sense (which I didn’t suppose it did, because I couldn’t quite understand it myself).

Hard as I strained my unfocused brain, with my ear pressed against the VEF-Spidola, I only could make out some disparate, a priori unmistakable words: *Great Britain* . . . *war* . . . *the United States* . . . *President* . . . *Prime Minister* . . . *Germany* . . . *NATO* . . . *Russia* . . . *Washington* . . . *Berlin Wall* . . . *Moscow* . . . *Brezhnev* . . . *bloody century* . . . *friendship* . . . *Winston Churchill* . . . *Karl Marx* . . . *Afghanistan* . . . *Solidarity* . . . *freedom* . . . *freedom.*

*Esh hip?* What the hell was that?

Then a female announcer’s prim, starchy voice cut in, saying in Russian that now they were going to provide the Russian translation of President Ronald Reagan’s speech to members of the British Parliament in the Royal Gallery at the Palace of Westminster in London, delivered earlier that day, June 8.

June 8? Ah, yes: in America, it was still the 8th of June. America was lagging behind us, timewise, with no hope of ever catching up. In childhood I had a book about America that was published in the early ’50s, still under Stalin, called *America: The Land of Yesterday*—or some such title. In it, America was portrayed as a terrible, backward place, hopelessly spinning its rusted wheels in the quicksand of history. Everything was “yesterday” about it—that’s what all of us Soviet children were taught all along. We were the human race’s radiant future, and America its shameful, dark past. Capitalism-imperialism, which was one and the same thing, was the yesterday of history—and as such, it was historically doomed. America was historically doomed in spades, totally. Dead as a doornail, in a near-future perspective. One had to feel sorry for it. Poor America. Poor hapless, unwitting Americans. Poor us too. Poor everyone. Poor our pathetic, long-dead Soviet dream.

I sat there, on a bench overlooking the serene, listless, sleeping, ashen-gray lake in the diminishing dusk of a fleeting northern night, listening to American President Ronald Reagan’s speech in Russian. In it he was talking about a lot of rather predictable things: history, freedom, war and peace, and the struggle between two irreconcilable ideologies—ours (bad, in his view) and theirs (good). He was talking about us and them—the Soviet Union and America. At one point, closer to the end, he caught me unawares, saying something unexpected: according to him, it was us, the mighty and eternal Soviet Union, that was historically doomed, and not the rotten world of capitalism-imperialism. It was, he said, Marxism-Leninism—which, of course, was the very essence of “us-ness,” the ultimate foundation, however ephemeral, upon which the Soviet Union stood, or was supposed to stand, with all of us inside it—that was destined to end up on . . . the *svalka,* the garbage dump of history, rather than America. Yes, so said Ronald Reagan. The garbage dump of history. That’s what she—the Voice of America’s reader—said he said. The garbage dump. I wondered what had been the exact American-English word or phrase he’d used. The garbage dump of history. *Svalka istorii.* Huh. But in any event, regardless, no matter his exact wording, the bottom line was that according to him, we were done for, finished; our time was up. It was just a matter of time, apparently. Of a short time too, presumably, because Reagan was no spring chicken. Our goose was cooked. Yes, baby. Finished, defeated, no more . . . My heart was beating rapidly; it was galloping in my chest. I told myself to calm down, took a few deep breaths and held them in my chest for as long as I could.

Okay, better. Very quiet was the diminishing night. The border with Finland and the rest of the larger, outer, non-Soviet world was but a dozen or so kilometers away. Right over there it was—a stone’s throw away, really—within a healthy, brisk walking distance. But at the same time, it was as far away as the moon from where I was, hunched up on the old wooden bench on a narrow patch of lakeshore in K.

“Listen, Garrichna . . .” I began. The dog, still slowly worrying the soup bone while seemingly beginning to fall asleep too, paid me no attention. “On the garbage dump of history,” I told him in a hissing whisper. “All of us, together. You too! Soviet dogs are not excluded. On the garbage dump of history, all of us together!”

Yes, all of us. It was quite a thought. All of us, with our lame-brained Marxism-Leninism, our stupid Soviet Union, or idiotic messianic notions of ourselves, our pathetically foolish delusions of grandeur. I wished Reagan would do it too and as soon as possible—finish us off already. Just toss us over there to that metaphoric (yet still vividly real) garbage dump of history. I was willing, ready, and able to end up there if it would be along with all the rest of our entire nation, the entire mighty and eternal Soviet Union. That would be fine by me. It would be. And then we would be no more.

I heard my name spoken quietly in back of me. Quickly I switched off the radio. Turning around, I saw Grandmother, wrapped in an oversize red sweater I remembered since I was practically an infant. She was standing a few steps away, at the edge of our small, overgrown garden, over between the old, gnarled ash tree and the tar paper–covered compost heap, where the straight path leading from the house opened out onto the lakeshore.

“Why up so early?” she said, yawning.

“Couldn’t sleep. Could ask you the same,” I replied.

“I wasn’t sleeping. Heard you step outside,” she said. “And taking the bone out of the pan for this useless mutt.” She smiled, nodding with her chin at Garrincha. “You shouldn’t’ve given it to him. Now he’ll be following you everywhere.”

“Well, I’m only here for a couple of days,” I told her. The afternoon before, when I just showed up in K, fresh off the morning Zelenogorsk train, she hadn’t asked me any questions. I wondered, briefly, how much she knew about my present circumstances, considering that I hadn’t seen her in a good two months—since she’d left the city in early April, when there was still thick snow on the ground here, with an intent, as was her wont, to stay on at least through the first week of December. She knew enough, I supposed. She knew, of course, that I’d been turned down for an émigré visa—in other words, that I was a *refusenik,* someone permanently thrown out of the normal round of ordinary Soviet middle-class life (such as it might be): that was old news. This probably was a bitter pill to swallow for her—a Party member (if one who made no secret originally of joining strictly out of the stark material necessity of raising her child, my father, alone) of four decades’ standing. She knew that as a corollary of being an open-ended refusenik, one with no discernible realistic perspectives ever to be permitted to leave the country, I would never have a good (whatever that meant), well-ordered Soviet life, like that of my parents, say: that I would never not be a self-declared would-be traitor to the Motherland, never would be able to buy a summer house or a car of my own . . . and so on. All that was understood perfectly by default. The sheer looming *neverness* of it—it had to be more than a bit heartbreaking to her, even more so than it was (if it was) to me. At her age, there was that much less hope, obviously. She also knew—or had to know—that her son and I had been virtually on nonspeaking terms for more than a year. This had to be especially painful for her, since her son—my father—constituted the primary meaning of her existence, and she had been a daily presence in my young life too, literally since I was born. The things we put ourselves through, I thought—and for what? The ephemeral and, it turns out, unattainable possibility of another life? When instead we could all just happily go together to the garbage dump of history. All as one. Well . . . joking aside, however, it was pretty damn sad to realize that I probably, almost (almost?) certainly was the main source of heartbreak in her life, at present time. I hoped she at least didn’t have an inkling that the reason I was here now was that I’d been followed around ominously by two faceless thugs in black raincoats from the organs. Fearing for my stupid life was all she needed additionally on her plate here at K. Well, hopefully, she harbored no such needless dark thoughts. And why should she? I hadn’t told anyone about those two. Although, to be realistic about it, she probably did suspect at least something of that nature, simply because it would be reasonable for her to do so. The afternoon before, when I’d just materialized in front of her, she hadn’t asked any questions. She never did either. She knew enough not to want to ask.

“Are you going fishing?” she asked.

“Maybe in a short while,” I said. “It’s a good idea, though. What time is it now—around three?”

“Three-fifteen. It’ll be light any moment now,” she said.

“When the lake turns, like, all pink-black,” I said, “mine will be the first boat out there.”

“You’re such a poet,” she said, smiling.

“I’ll need to dig up some worms.”

“It was raining cats and dogs two days ago. You won’t have any difficulty with that,” she said.

We were silent for a few moments.

“The veranda roof is leaking in one spot,” she said. “I guess I’ll need to call on my handyman, Konstantin, this here mutt’s owner.” She sighed. “He’ll fix it for a bottle of vodka. I only have two left, but what’s there to be done. It’ll be a good bit of work, and it just needs to be fixed, although we hardly use it anymore. The veranda, I mean.”

“For a Jewish city woman in her seventies, you’re quite the countryside dweller,” I said with a chuckle as both of us turned to look at the house veranda, which was dark and empty and looked abandoned, Chekhovian, but also beautiful and lovely and sad in the muted, nascent light of nearing dawn. Another life.

“Remember how just so very recently there was bright-yellow light there at night, so cozy, and everyone was there, all of us and other people, laughing, drinking tea with gooseberry and currant preserves and sweet wine and . . . and laughing and just being happy,” she said, with a catch to her voice, a slight note of wistful bitterness. “How happy we were then. And now . . .”

And now everything was different, and things would never be the same. That was just a simple, hard fact of life. Things changed. Life changed. And we both knew she thought this was all because of me. That’s what she was thinking. And she was right. “What were they saying on the radio?” she asked, shaking her head slightly to chase away the sad thoughts. “The enemy voices. I couldn’t really make it out as I was walking down here.”

“My, Grandma, what keen ears you have,” I said. “Well, in a nutshell, we’re all going to the garbage dump of history.”

“Who is?” She gave me a concerned look.

“We, the Soviet people,” I said. “The entire Soviet Union.”

“What, all of us?” she said, laughing quietly.

“All of us together, holding hands, singing patriotic songs,” I said.

“Says who?” she asked, bemused.

“Says Ronald Reagan,” I said.

“Well,” she said. “If Ronald Reagan himself says so . . .”

Again we were silent for a moment. And what was there to say?

Just like that, instantaneously, it started getting light all around us. The dark mirror of the lake’s surface turned into pink-black marble right before our eyes. This was a pure marvel every single time. I felt happy and serene, filled with hope and wonder. Where had all my worries of a minute earlier gone? It was good to be alive. It was good being at the lakeshore, young and not knowing what life had in store for me and looking forward to getting into a boat and rowing out into the lake, into all that cool freshness, and spending the next few hours doing nothing but gazing at the gradually blueing lake, at the sunning-up forest of tall pines and firs, at the granite boulders hemming it in, at the red cork bobber of my makeshift fishing pole floating on the water, dipping up and down gently. It was good to be . . . It was good to exist, even despite—and perhaps especially because of—having been consigned to the garbage dump of history. It was just good. I had no words to describe it. It was good.

“Oh, but what’s that red light on the other shore, Grandma?” I asked, remembering and pointing across. “Have you seen it there before? That bright cold red dot?”

“Where?” she said, squinting, peering across the water.

“That red dot, over there, on the other shore!” I said, staring hard. “Don’t you see it?”

But now I could no longer see it myself.