

I found these images in London in 2006. They were in a collection of photos from the Soviet NKVD archives taken at the peak of Stalin's terror years in the late 1930s. The book was *Ordinary Citizens*, curated by David King, a significant collector of Russian photography from the time of the tsars onwards.

I grew up in a mildly conservative family. Politics were rarely discussed, and little attention was paid to power games per se. Occasionally, somebody might have been described as a bit of a pinko, which then would only have meant having a socialist viewpoint on life. I hardly knew what communism was. My father's modus operandi with his business and family was a quiet, benign paternalism.

My infatuation with all things Russian had been ignited by the glamour of the ballet. My early intuition of a transcendental dimension was nourished by the music of Tchaikovsky and images of Pavlova and Nijinski.

I can remember being taken to the Diaghilev Exhibition in 1957. All the rooms had been sprayed with Guerlain's Mitsouko, Sergei Pavlovich's favourite perfume. This was long before the EU regulations enforced drastic reformulations on the perfume industry. I am sure it was the animal musk and the peculiar odour all worn theatre costumes acquire that contributed to the state of swooning disequilibrium in my group of teenage girls reared in post-war austerity.

Imagine too, our awe on seeing a crumpled somewhat daggy black silk velvet tunic and trunks hanging humbly in a glass case. Were we really to believe that this costume for *Giselle*,

was that worn by the god of plastic movement, being reincarnated before our eyes by the improbable means of this limp, small-statured costume, sized for what seemed to be a 14-year-old boy. It still exists, greatly restored however, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

One cannot but make comparisons to similar wonder when seeing relics of bone, hair and nail in their tiny asymmetric Miro-like caskets in rural Spanish churches, all purporting to the martyrdoms of the saints. Authenticity, I believe is not the point at all, they are transmitters, and validate themselves as energisers for an empathetic experience we otherwise might not have.

Before synthetics and nylon net, ballet costumes and pointe shoes were stiffened with a cocktail of animal glues and shellac, and tinted with something mysteriously called FEV, French Enamel Varnish.

In the 1950s ballet mothers tormented themselves on how to solve the mysteries of making their daughter's ballet skirt stick out. Tarleton, a starched cotton muslin very soon drooped, as did the 1960s rock and roll skirt, similarly challenged, inherit the melted sugar solution from the previous generation of suburban ballet mothers.

These alchemies, when ignited by hot working bodies sent a unique waft over the footlights of all performances. I can recall this smell vividly at Covent Garden Royal Opera House before air conditioning. The gross animalism of it was savoured in the auditorium as the heraldic smell of the oncoming divine experience.

The glasnost of the 1980s brought about the possibility of access to OGPU, NKVD, and later KGB archives. This opportunity generated a huge surge of interest from academics, historians and private persons seeking the facts surrounding missing family members and work colleagues, many of whom had only been given the cryptic explanation after their disappearance 'without right to correspond', not knowing this was usually a euphemism for the arrested person having been shot shortly after arrest.

Jonathan Brent in his capacity as Yale University's representative, has given a revealing account of his confrontations with Russian academics and archivists. His book, *Inside the Stalin Archives* describes the negotiations with his Soviet-reared counterparts for access to documents at the deepest and most secret levels .

These were convoluted dealings, during which the disturbing change of status the collapsing regime was bringing to the literary and academic classes became clear to him. These were people who had been accustomed to the support and social prestige that conformity with the Soviet system had given them. The precipitous birth of capitalism was making their mind-set irrelevant, forcing many of them into low-paid menial jobs. The opportunity to negotiate toughly with the American for influence and profit was not something to be passed by.

Brent was himself a descendant of Russian Jews, whom tsarist pogroms had forced into the Pale of Settlement, before emigrating to America. The time spent at the tables of the many multi-anagrammed institutes he worked in became the stage for an important personal journey. The decade-long period of negotiation gave him language fluency and an enhanced realisation of his roots. All of which, was no doubt observed,

encouraged even, by the parties on the other of the table, resulting in their revealing declaration: ‘*Au contraire* Jonathan, you are our representative at Yale.’

The cultural cold war years have taught us to make heroes of the dissidents in art, music, and literature, conferring profound reverence on the achievements of Pasternak, Grossman, and Solzhenitsyn. We grieved for the price they paid for their refusal to conform to the parameters of the Soviet Writers Union.

However, on reading Sheila Fitzpatrick’s review, very aptly subtitled ‘Vodka and Caesium’ of a book by Svetlana Alexievich called *Secondhand Time*, a completely new compass bearing is given to us. Fitzpatrick’s article re-directs our sympathies towards recognising the despair the new politics of Glasnost have brought to the older true-believing Sovok. Usually a figure of ridicule (the word itself is apparently a pun on the Russian word for dustpan) these changes brought devastation to the patriotism, culture and beliefs of their Soviet world view.

One cannot but be moved by the new perspective Svetlana Alexievich’s book gives us. Most of the testimonies there are harrowing, but when read free of prejudice, the exposure of the damage, dysfunction, alcoholism, physical abuse, and racial thuggery that had permeated into ordinary family life as a toxic legacy over generations is revelatory. The author too seems to have retained her roots in Soviet orthodoxy, and embraces these tormented bearers of the dysfunctionality brought down upon them by decades of false promises and outright state deceit.

Many of these people had owed their position in society to the effectiveness of Soviet technical education, which had been the enabler for their rise from border-line illiteracy to management

roles, and, in some instances to real power – within a single generation. The tirades of envy, hatred, racial contempt, that hiss through their testimonies towards the behaviours of the new rich of infant capitalism, transcend their psychopathy and resonate with a truly tragic dimension.

The making of these images has been a labour of love. I do ask myself however if the additional aesthetic weavings into what was only the soberest recording doesn't divert or alienate the spectator from their plain impact. They have been without doubt my incentive to learn about Russian history beyond the tutu.

I like to ponder if child 16323 is still alive. Unlikely but not impossible. With means and time, her life trajectory might have been traced. The painter within would have had a great joy in pointing out her uncanny facial resemblance to the androgynous angel in Leonardo da Vinci's versions of 'The Madonna of the Rocks'. When I was in Moscow in 2011 I did entertain the idea of pinning these images on to the front doors of the 'taken'. David King gives the Moscow and Leningrad addresses of the subjects of his book – a nod perhaps towards the purpose of the Stolpesteine in Berlin.

Another author sets a very different style. After the visceral revelations of Alexievich's subjects, it comes as a shock to read Anya von Bremzen's account – by means of satire, irony and sardonic humour – of her family's unhinging from Soviet orthodoxy.

Her book *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* is hilarious, and without seeming to forfeit sharp perceptions, tells freely of the absurdities inherent in her Soviet childhood, albeit from the sheltered standpoint of a family on the fringes of the *nomenklatura* class. Her mother was a determined inner

emigrant, but Anya freely admits to having loved the Lenin corner in the classroom, the youth camp songs and the bliss on receiving the red Pioneer neck scarf.

The 'mature communism' of the Brezhnev years brought about recognition of the von Bremzens' Jewish background. Not at all observant, Jewishness was an ethnicity for them, far removed from conscious and practised religious belief. The 1917 revolution promised a release for Jews from tsarist anti-Semitism, only to be crushed when subsequent class war attacked the prosperity of the emancipated, and made victims of the pious.

Anya's mother, forever a free spirit, was determined to emigrate to the US, something they achieved in 1974. Contrary to her mother's ecstasies at the free world's never ending plenty, Anya was overcome with regret and not entirely rational nostalgia for the Soviet kitchen. She celebrates its dour honesty, the 'silk purses from sow's ears' ingenuity that had been its very essence.

She makes much of the skill and patience needed to produce a celebratory family dinner, the ability to master the arts of 'blat' – the secret routes by which rumour of an availability travelled, the ever ready 'ulitsa' bag in the pocket, without which nobody ever left home. She elevates somewhat improbably the daily grind of shortages and queues into an urban sport for the canny. She returned to Russia and toured remote provinces collecting traditional recipes.

Seeing the small passport-sized images of the Russian orphans compelled me. The contrast between the routine exposure and the crisis of the sitter produced images of the most startling intensity, and it cannot be without irony that these sensitive portraits are the outcome of gross acts of social violence. David

King attributes much of their expressivity to a slow exposure in natural light, unlike the flash shots utilised by their contemporaries in the West.

The frontality of the shots, while expedient to the recording process, conveys an icon to the viewer, the solemnity and frankness seemingly in defiance of the cruel processes that awaited the children.

A common arrest procedure was that after the father was seized, the mother would be taken some weeks later, deemed guilty by association, leaving their children in the direst of situations.

Orlando Figes's book *The Whisperers* presents testimonies both of the victims and the favoured. He tells of the countless grandparents, who despite all the prejudices they would have to face were prepared to take guardianship of these all-but-orphaned children. These acts of family loyalty brought many penalties but, as an older generation, many had not fully discarded the premises of Christian obligation and charity.

The children not so fortunate as to have relatives care for them endured a very harsh existence in state orphanages. As children of 'enemies of the people' they would have no access to tertiary education or state accommodation, and would be destined for menial work or deployment into the armed services.

Most fought tenaciously for social acceptance by means of deception or academic excellence. It was essential to conceal their spoilt biographies to pass through the all-enabling trinity of 'The Octobrists', or 'Pioneers' with that all-affirming red scarf, and in society's eyes the final crown of Komsomol membership. These milestones of Soviet society were essential if the children of the repressed were to have any kind of viable Soviet life.

Acceptance came at a terrible price: the necessity of denying one's parents; sentenced to lifelong deceit, fear of exposure and political ultra-conformity. Many themselves became informers, either from direct pressure from the NKVD, or just as the best possible social insurance policy.

The culture of the duty-to-inform permitted countless acts of neighbourly spite. Imagine finding out decades later that it was that nice lady down the corridor who gave you little cakes at Easter who had been responsible for your mother's ten-year hard labour sentence. These betrayals and those on a more institutional level committed generations to a life of collusion with the very agents of their parents' murder or incarceration in the Gulag.

When reading of the terrible sufferings and dysfunctions in *Secondhand Time*, one cannot but recognise it as the direct legacy and consequence of the deceptions and brutalities of mid-century ideological combat.

*'Victim and executioner are equally ignoble; the lesson of the camps is brotherhood in abjection.'*

DAVID ROUSSET, *The Days of our Death*