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THE KING'S GAMBIT

A Novel about the Resilience
of Energodar

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WAR AND PEACE

THE SACRED WAR

The *Contemporary* Cultural Center was used not only for theatrical performances, but also for holding various events. In particular, events on May 9. This is the day of victory—in war. Great war! Patriotic war!

This victory is also a theater. After all, all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.

That war, great and patriotic, is a source of pride for the Soviet man.

After Victory Day in 1945, cripples and victims of war, begging for alms flooded the streets of Soviet cities. And how many cities lay in ruins! Numerous front-line soldiers ended up in Stalinist camps for various reasons. They could never receive pardon. They dreamed that the stronghold of all progressive humanity, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, would be attacked by the damned Western imperialists. And set them free...

Only twenty years later, when the generation changed and the war began to be forgotten, Soviet propaganda started promoting Victory Day. This day was made a day off. On May 9, various events were organized, and their

number grew with time and became more massive. "Polished" films were shot about the Great Patriotic War¹, such as *Liberation* or *Soldiers of Freedom*. Various "correct books" were written depicting the events in the required way. Among them, an important place was occupied by memoir literature meticulously edited and passed through the sieve of censorship. "Correct" veterans, who often had not even been to the front, were sitting at the back, delivering fiery speeches to large audiences, sharing their memories, often heavily fantasized.

This is how the image of the great patriotic war was created in the mind of the Soviet man. In it, the Soviet people heroically resisted the so-called German-fascist invaders. Almost all alone! True, our allies, such as the United States of America or Great Britain, did contribute their mite... But their role was insignificant. And the combat operations they conducted were not worth the sniff of the shaggy hair of the glorious Soviet Red Army. And the lend-lease provided by the United States to the Soviet Union was worth almost nothing. Although Mykyta Khrushchev (better known to the people in the West under the Russian variant of the name, Nikita Khrushchev), who managed to fight a little during the Great Patriotic War, debunked Stalin's "personality cult" and controlled the Soviet Union for many years, admitted at the end of his life that without the American Lend-Lease, the cradle of all progressive humanity would not have won the war. But that was Mykyta Khrushchev's personal opinion. Who would have listened to him?..

¹ Russian propaganda term for World War 2

Later, the allies in the Great Patriotic War were completely forgotten. Only the heroism of the Red Army soldiers and the wisdom of the Soviet commanders were mentioned. The slogan “we have liberated Europe” came into being.

The victims of the war... they were receding into the background. Because they did not fit into the “polished” picture of the Great Patriotic War. Although the same Father Stalin in 1945 announced the following in his aforementioned address on the Victory Day:

“The great sacrifices we made in the name of the freedom and independence of our Motherland, the incalculable privations and sufferings experienced by our people in the course of the war, the intense work in the rear and at the front, placed on the altar of the Motherland, have not been in vain...”

The Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War survived the collapse of the USSR. It lived and flourished in independent Ukraine as well. “Thank you, grandfather, for the Victory”—such a slogan created by Russian-Putin propaganda was successfully spread in there. Every year, the most rated TV channel “Inter” duly broadcasted the Victory Day concert and the marches of the Russian-Putin’s “immortal regiments.” The billboards showed some (apparently Ukrainian!) candidates to the Ukrainian Parliament wearing St. George’s ribbon invented by the Russian political technologists, attaching it to the lapels of their jackets.

Neither Energodar nor its atomic “twin-towns” escaped that plague.

In the town, as long back as the Soviet times, the remains of soldiers killed during the Great Patriotic War were brought to the premises of the City Council. Why, pray tell, disturb the dead? To deaden the living? A mound was piled over these transported remains—just like the Scythians had done many hundred years before. A stele was also erected. May the grateful descendants remember the dead!

Still, the descendants were not grateful enough, especially children. In winter, they had fun descending from the mound on sleds. Some grown-ups were outraged because of the blasphemy. But the descendants did not react to this indignation. Where else could they find such a cool slide? Because steppe surrounded their home town.

After Ukraine had gained independence, in Energodar, the nuclear power plant laid out the Pobyeda (i.e., Victory) Park on its territory. It was a recreation area between the town and the Kakhovka Reservoir. Military equipment was brought and installed there, e.g. two airplanes, some anti-aircraft guns... Entering the park, the residents of Energodar immediately saw some old military vehicles. It reminded them of the Great Patriotic War. More precisely, about the Soviet Victory in it.

Next, an Energodar resident could take a walk, e.g. to the ponds or pump-rooms with clean water, to wander along nice paths. Children often came to roller skate there. Young couples went there on a date. For many, it was (and still is) their favorite place to relax. But it had the “correct” ideological load.

What, in fact, did an ordinary Energodar resident know and think about the war? Or a resident of the former Pripyat, Yuzhnoukrainsk, Netishyn, Kuznetsovsk? By the way, Kuznetsovsk was named to honor one of the great Heroes of the Soviet Union, the spy (some would say terrorist) Nikolay (Mykola) Kuznetsov.

Soviet people born in the 1950s, 1960s and later had never smelled gunpowder. Most Energodar residents were born after 1950.

They had never experienced fear of war, unlike their parents or grandparents.

Well, our grandfathers did fight. And they did secure peace for us. "Thank you, grandfather, for the Victory." You can take a walk in the park... Victory Park.

Veronika remembered one episode, which she believed was insignificant. But for some reason it stuck in her memory. She was traveling by suburban train from Energodar to Zaporizhzhia.

Zaporizhzhia is like a Cossack city. There is the island of Khortytsia there, where, they say, the first Zaporizhian Sich once appeared. But during Soviet times, Zaporizhzhia was successfully internationalized, in other words, Russified. The Cossacks were almost forgotten. But Lenin was remembered! The grandiose avenue, named after this Bolshevik leader, stretched from the city's main railway station to the Dnipro HPP dam—as long as eleven (!) kilometers, or almost seven miles. This is one of the longest avenues in Europe! And there, on that avenue, there is the largest monument to Lenin. What a megalomania!

It was early May, just before the Victory Day. Of course, both in Zaporizhzhia city and in the Zaporizhzhia Oblast, this “holiday with tears in the eyes”¹ was to be properly celebrated. Everyone was preparing for it. War films were shown on TV. Military songs were played on radio, only to merge into a continuous cacophony on May 9.

Two men were talking in the carriage. One was middle-aged. The other was old. The former had not witnessed the war, but he said something like this: they say that our soldiers had felt sorry for their soldiers, and tried to save their lives, unlike the German Nazis.

The older man listened to him for some time, but soon couldn't stand it anymore:

“You know nothing,” he told his interlocutor tightly. “Our generals did not spare the soldiers. Sometimes, generals forced them to attack the enemy without any preparation or good weapons. And they died in dozens, hundreds. How many Red Army soldiers died during the assault-crossing of the Dnipro River? No one knows. They talk about the battle near Moscow, about Stalingrad, the Kursk Salient... Even about the blockade of Leningrad, but they are silent about the battle for the Dnipro. Or almost silent, at least. Why?”

“Why?” echoed his younger interlocutor.

¹ A phrase from the song “Victory Day” by the composer David Tukhmanov to the words of Vladimir Kharitonov. An indispensable symbolic attribute of celebrations on May 9, not only in Russia, but also in the CIS countries.

“Because hundreds of thousands of people were irrationally killed on the Dnipro. Stalin was determined to take Kyiv before the day of the October Revolution. Soviet commanders had to do their best. Otherwise, off with their heads! Each of them feared “the father of nations.” And the soldiers... Why pity them? They assaulted the Dnipro in the fall of 1943—from the end of October to November. The water in the river at that time is cold. No watercraft. A fishing boat was a gift of God. And so, they used wood boards or logs. While the Germans were well entrenched on the right bank of the Dnipro. They had cannons, machine guns and whatnot. Thousands of our soldiers died, shot with bullets and shells, or sunk in the water. Dnipro is a big mass grave.

“There is no war without victims,” the younger man tried to argue.

“Those victims are too many,” the elder waved off his words. “During the retreat from Zaporizhzhia, our Dnipro hydroelectric power plant dam was blown up. How many people got drowned is impossible to count.”

“It was a military necessity. You can’t leave important industrial facilities to the enemy!”

“Sure thing! In order for the Germans not to seize the Dnipro hydroelectric power plant, the military had to sink thousands of Cossacks. Like little kittens! And so that none of them would cry out.”

The young man couldn’t say anything. The senior continued.

“And how many factories were taken from Zaporizhzhia to the East, to Russia! Not many were returned to Ukraine.”

“Then there only was one country, the Soviet Union. If something was lost at one place, then something was gained at another one.”

“But now it is not one country. The Soviet Union is gone. We have Russia. And we also have Ukraine. And the plant we built we have lost to Russians.

The train was already arriving to Zaporizhzhia. It was necessary to pack the things. The talk stumbled.

Veronika seemed to have forgotten that conversation. One day, when she came to the Victory Park and looked at the airplanes and anti-aircraft guns, she remembered what the senior man was saying at the carriage. His words about the Great Patriotic War did not fit into her idea of it...

She was born and raised in Sevastopol. In this city, like nowhere else, there was a real cult of the Great Patriotic War, both during the Soviet times and in the already independent Ukraine. After all, it is a hero city. At school, teachers told children about the heroic defense of Sevastopol against the German-fascist hordes, which had lasted for eight months, from 1941 to 1942. On May 9, the city was drowning in red flags. One-and-a-half-ton lorries could be met all over the city; they seemed to have been taken from the filming of war movies. Portraits of Lenin were carried. Sevastopol seemed to have returned to the Soviet times. Although they had never really left them.

The conversation in the carriage seems to have sown a seed of doubt in Veronika's ideas about the times when her grandfathers were at war. Could the Soviet government have done this?

It turns out that it could.

Veronika found some information on the Internet about the detonation of the Dnipro hydroelectric power plant during the war. On August 18, 1941, the Red Army, retreating from Zaporizhzhia, blew up the dam of this plant. At that time, Dnipro HPP was one of the symbols of the Soviet industrialization. It gave a large amount of electricity. Almost as much as Zaporizhzhia NPP does now.

The known executors of the detonation are Red Army demolitionists Boris Epov and Aleksey Petrovskyi. However, they are only performers. At what level the order was given, and who precisely gave it, we do not know. Will we find it out some day? It is highly unlikely. The Soviet authorities knew how to hide secrets.

Due to the sudden flooding of a large area, which occurred as a result of destroying the dam, thousands of people were killed. These were not German soldiers, but Soviet people. Peaceful, innocent.

To this day, there are disputes over the number of Zaporizhzhia residents killed during the flood. Different figures are given, from 20 to 100 thousand people. The Soviet authorities did not keep statistics of losses in such conditions. And the Germans showed no interest in the terrible tragedy.

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