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Prologue

Stalin looked at the date of the secret service report which sealed Dyoshka's fate: 24 December 1938. Stalin stopped, looked up, and came to realise what a year it had been. The world had nearly crucified him for discarding the traitors, but what did they understand? A better world was about to be built and if liquidating comrades from way back was required to achieve it ... Stalin shrugged his shoulders.

Ossip Stalin was alone in his office, burning the midnight oil. He had made that a habit in recent years. Outside, Moscow had gone quiet on a dark and ice cold winter night. Most Kremlin buildings, however, had their lights on and in the offices, the bureaucrats were wide awake. Everyone had to be in the ready to take an order from Stalin, or as some secretly called him, our Red Tsar. Looking again at the report in front of him, Dyoshka's obvious lie in a French court room amused Stalin. He read it out half laughing: 'I'm as innocent as a dove!'

Stalin leant back, shook his head, and the memories flooded back in a painful flash: Dyoshka's beautiful voice, her rendition of *Souliko*, the sweet old Georgian melody that he never grew tired of - and then the crude manner in which she had pushed him away using his one and only weakness.

Dyoshka had sung *Souliko* for the Red Army when they felt at their lowest. The men were hungry and anxious about Denikin's White troops who were pushing forward relentlessly. Within days they could be in town, snatching Kursk from the Reds. Dyoshka's green glistening silk dress was obscene for a performance in the Civil War. A relic from the world they had just brought to an end, it still brightened up a few rare moments, so the revolutionaries could forget about the mayhem outside.

Stalin was in a daze the next day, imagining Dyoshka had sung

Souliko just for him, the People's Commissar from Georgia. Obviously, Dyoshka was married to one of his officers, but it still felt as she had sung just for him that night, for him alone. But the People's Commissar was sucked in by Dyoshka's professionalism and unprepared for the rude shock that she had in store for him. While he remembered it, his face changed to the same painful grimace of their encounter 19 years earlier.

'Dyoshka innocent? There was nothing innocent about her, ever!' Stalin rumbled and shook his head. He drew on his black pipe blowing out thick blue clouds.

All of Russia knew Dyoshka as The Great Plevitskaya, or the Kursk Nightingale. In her family, she was darling Dyoshka, or Katya, when her father exercised his parental power to turn her into a singer. For the audiences between Brest and Vladivostock only a few years later, she was Nadezhda, the sweetest songbird in the Empire. Those who knew her as Stalin had though, described her more as a consummate actress, devoid of any compassion. Time to clip your wings my dove, Stalin grinned and initialled the paper in front of him. Before he banged his rubber stamp on it, he hesitated, as if to shy away from the finality. But he did not give in. Plevitskaya was going down and for good, too. The seal went on the paper, the paper in the envelope. 'Chapter closed' Stalin rumbled, and flung the envelope on the pile for his Lyubianka henchmen.

1

In 1899 Katya looked blissfully innocent, when she sang *Souliko* to the landed gentry in the South of Russia. Little did she know, she would lose some of her innocence that evening, when she was 15 years old. The night started out like any other performance by the wandering Dimitrievich Gypsy clan. Every few days they went through the same routine; find a site for the encampment

well before nightfall, walk to the mansion in the morning, and see what could be sold to the gentry. Sharpening knives and scissors perhaps, selling horse medicine, fixing kettles, fortune-telling for the ladies, showing off the dancing bears. But selling an evening of Gypsy music was the best of all. Often, the travellers were expected. Knives and kettles had already been set aside in one of the stables.

With Count Popovkin the Dimitrieviches had been lucky. Like every year, a group of friends and relatives from Moscow spent the summer on his estate. This year, the Count was keen to book the music and he indicated he might buy the bearskin as well. In fact, Count Popovkin had hoped the Gypsies would turn up. Rumors had it, one of his young guests, music teacher and composer Serguey Rakhmaninoff, had just ended a romance with a woman who was rumored to be a Gypsy. Emotional Gypsy tunes shone through many of Rakhmaninoff's compositions, so maybe Gypsy music would cheer him up, Count Popovkin thought. Most days, Serguey appeared withdrawn as if all the world's troubles were weighing on his shoulders. Serguey's silent sadness, however, was a lot more banal. After the embarrassing end of his romance, Serguey had planned to throw himself into composing during the holidays, but every time he went to the music room, someone else was playing the grand.

When hiring the Gypsies, Count Popovkin also thought of his eight year old grandson Stepan, who had not seen a Gypsy performance before. Over lunch, Popovkin explained *'how to make a Gypsy girl sing'* and he was looking forward to initiating the young lad into this age old Russian custom.

.....

... 'Fortune-telling, barinya?' Katya asked softly. The lady stretched out her bejeweled hand. Katya's finger travelled over the fate and sun lines in her palm, up and down, then she closed

her eyes like looking into herself, creating the impression she was receiving messages from spirits. It was a well rehearsed show. *'Husband wants son'* would have to be the culmination of her soothsaying but she had to build up to that. Cryptic sentences about travel were never wrong. The gentry travelled nearly as much as the Gypsies, except less often, but then to much farther destinations.

'A trip over water, very treacherous, barinya, beware of the long and deep water', Katya said in a half-whisper. 'I see a young woman ... a girl ... a daughter perhaps in a big city'. They all saw themselves in a big city, and there always was a young woman, Raya had told her. Years later they would come to experience the pain that the young woman would bring, but for now, they were gently steered towards the idea of a daughter.

Katya closed her eyes again, and waited a little longer to 'receive' her answer from 'the spirits'. 'Barinya, I also see a son, your husband's wish will be fulfilled very soon.'

Now the woman was smiling all over. 'You are right, you are quite right!' The woman was over the moon. She looked straight into Katya's eyes 'How can you know about that!'

'Our spirits, barinya, our spirits,' Katya said slowly, then stretching out her tambourine to collect.

As she moved further into the audience, Katya reached the two young men whose eyes she had sensed all evening. During the *Yablochko* song, one of them had plucked a notebook from his shirt pocket and scribbled into it. The other one was very tall and as she came nearer she discovered he had huge hands and feet. The tall man's eyes were looking inward so Katya approached the other young man first. To her surprise he turned the tambourine around for a quick look. But the tall man had missed nothing.

'Don't do this, Reinhold Moricevich' he said in a full and deep basso voice, 'tambourine is women's business.'

‘Poppies, Serguey. It is so pretty!’ Reinhold answered.

Serguey hastily put a few coins in the tambourine. He then took Reinhold’s coins and put them in as well, as if he wanted to hasten Katya’s disappearance. She felt his uneasiness. Was it because she could not take her eyes off his huge hands?

Once the coins were in, Katya courtseyed deeply and looked at Serguey Rakhmaninoff, ‘thank you, barin, thank you.’

Rakhmaninoff nodded, every inch the aristocrat he was born. Orhan was now approaching, playing fast ornaments which deflected from what could have become an embarrassing moment.

Raising his eyebrows just a little, Orhan directed Katya to rejoin the musicians in the stage area. As she was making her way back to the front, someone held her by her dress.

‘Would you sing the *Dark Eyes* Song?’ asked Count Popovkin while fishing in his pocket for the three Rouble note.

‘Oh, yes, barin,’ Katya looked at the money and waited.

The Count turned to his grandson, waving the bill. ‘You remember how to make a Gypsy girl sing, Stepan?’

‘Yes’, Stepan said softly

.....in 1905 Katya becomes Nadezhda

Behind the market, Nadezhda went into a smelly old building which everybody called the bazaar. It was, however, just the Ukrainian capitol’s disused market, crammed with tiny traditional one-man-businesses. Nadezhda wanted to have her hair cut by the finest hairdresser in Kiev. Victorina had told her, the watch repairers came first, then the group of writing and reading stalls. Further down to the right, the barber with the blue sign was the place to go.

As she walked past, an old man solicited her business ‘I write the most beautiful love letter to your sweetheart, pretty dyoshka. He’ll marry you in no time.’

Another man with short legs and a long white beard invited

her to come inside. 'Come in and look at the latest innovations, dyoshka. I have typewriters for your letters European style, for Greek, French or with Russian letters.'

Suddenly Nadezhda remembered something. She turned back to the old man and asked 'You can read, can't you?'

'Of course, Madame, of course. Russian, Greek, French, Armenian.'

'Alright, alright,' Nadezhda said 'Just a bit in Russian. Someone gave me a paper with lyrics, but I found it hard to read them. How much if you read it to me five times?'

'Five times, Madame?' the old man asked perplexed. 'Are you hard of hearing?'

'No. I have to learn it by heart so I can sing it.'

'Ah, you're a singer. Of course, how could I have missed the music in your voice! 5 times, that is 50 Kopecks.'

Nadezhda nodded and took the coin from her basket to show she had the money to pay. Then they stepped inside the cubicle. The old man looked at the handwriting on the torn and brownish piece of paper which Nadezhda unfolded.

'Oh, the song about the dapper merchant. I heard that once, nice song,' the old man said and hummed the first few bars. He read the lyrics out in the rhythm of the song, once, twice, three times. Then Nadezhda interrupted him.

'Now, I'll sing it, and when I get stuck you prompt me, alright?'

'Sure, as you wish, Madame.'

Nadezhda started singing the song. Her rich dark voice carried further than she thought and attracted the neighbours. In silent admiration they stood outside and in the doorway. The old man prompted Nadezhda twice. When she finished, everyone applauded. She started again and her audience outside the door grew.

‘She’s from the Birchtree,’ someone whispered. The second time she got through without interruptions. There was even more applause. As she was leaving, one of the men turned to her.

‘Madame, you’re wasted in the Birchtree. My son has a friend in the Villa Rhode in Petersburg.’

.....26th January 1908, Villa Rhode, Saint Petersburg.....

‘Pity, I did not bring the syrup today. I had a double dose of cocaine put in. It works like a dream. But even without it, it’ll pass, Nadezhda. It always does,’ Maria tried to calm her down.

Nadezhda nodded slowly, closing her eyes. When she finally performed on stage that evening, her routine carried her through. The other singers and instrumentalists did their brackets. The restaurant clapped as one in every fast chorus until they stood up and sang along in *Kalinka*. Just when Nadezhda thought the evening was set on its path so she might ask Arkady if she could leave early, he appeared in the wings. He waved to her and to the guitar section.

In the middle of the song Arkady motioned Nadezhda and the guitarists Kalyi and Yury to come immediately. With a firm tambourine swing and double beat Nadezhda brought the song to an end. As they stepped into the wings, Maria came forward.

She passed very closely to Stanco in the first row of the orchestra and told him, ‘*Kasbek*, Nadezhda’s key.’ Stanco shook his head, but Maria hissed ‘*Kasbek*, or else.’

So Stanco played the intro to the popular song from the Caucasus Mountains. The song had just enough exotic flavour to fascinate, but not so much as to become inaccessible to general audiences. Tchaikovsky had found that, too, and had taken the song to the concert stage. Maria mimicked Nadezhda’s mannerisms and now she sounded so much like Nadezhda that Arkady started to smile.

To Nadezhda and the guitarists Arkady said, ‘there’s a troika

out there for you. I forget what they celebrate today in one of the palaces. Doesn't matter, I suppose.'

'Does it have to be me tonight?' Nadezhda sighed, 'I am a little tired.'

'They asked for you, my dear,' and with a sarcastic smile Arkady added, 'if you really want to be a recording star, you can't afford to be tired when things are happening!'

'Well, how much am I getting extra?' Nadezhda asked.

Arkady shook his head.

'Surely you have agreed on a fee for my trouble, haven't you?' Nadezhda asked flippantly.

'No,' Arkady said. 'We will have to foot your fee tonight because it's such an honour. Actually - maybe it should be you who pays. You have the honour to sing for Siloti and Rakhmaninoff!'

'Still ...,' Nadezhda was looking for a soft protest.

'Don't worry. We'll give you 3 Roubles. But tonight the honour is definitely on your side, rubbing shoulders with these two celebrities!'

'I am not complaining, but you taught us these rules! If it's worth doing, it's worth a reward - or - if it's not worth paying for, why bother doing it in the first place? These were your words.'

'Glad to hear you remember them so well. There's an exception to every rule. Grab your coats, or the coachman will turn stiff out there in the snow.'

..... *Paris, 1924*

Between brackets she relaxed in the dressing room, when she heard voices in the corridor. Just as in other Parisian venues, flimsy timber walls allowed every word spoken outside to be understood.

'I'm an old friend of Plevitskaya, from Russia,' she heard a male voice in perfect French. 'Here ...'

The man did not finish his sentence, obviously gave a tip to

the call boy who said, 'Merci Monsieur. Spassiva.'

When Nadezhda opened the door, she looked at her visitor.

'Please help me out,' she said in her official voice. 'I don't recall your name. You have to forgive me, but we meet so many people on our tours.'

The man entered, closed the door behind him, and then leant against it to block the entrance.

He looked around with alert grey eyes, then spoke in a whisper, 'we never met, as a matter of fact.'

His Russian was that of a well educated man. 'Felix Edmundovich thanks you for his greetings through Shneider, but is unable to answer himself. He has been flattered that you remember him and that you want to return to bolshevik Russia, our home that is wrongly maligned by the rich and powerful.'

'Who are you?' Nadezhda asked shaking.

'Lessner, Dr. Martin Lessner,' the man said with a bow. 'I am on my way to Amsterdam where I will open an antique bookshop. I have words from Moscow, Skoblin will be pardoned for having fought on the wrong side. But before Felix Edmundovich can arrange that, he needs more of your and especially Skoblin's continued cooperation. You two are much too valuable to lose now. He is prepared to accommodate that.'

Nadezhda was speechless.

'Look, we know you don't live terribly well at the moment.' Lessner reached into his overcoat and pulled out a thick bundle of Francs tied together by a string.

'Here, this is a down payment. You meet all the enemies of our revolution, from all walks of life. We like to show our appreciation for your efforts. Our interest lies in knowing what subversive activities are planned. More importantly, who could be inclined to work for our new Soviet Russia. We don't want to recruit anyone who is not ready. Keep your eyes and ears open.

Nikolay knows how to find us.'

Nadezhda did not move to take the money.

'No need to be shy. It's Nikolay's bonus, he certainly earned it, for both of you,' Lessner said with a devious smile and added 'We are plumbers and arrange leaks when we want to.'

'Don't take me for a mug,' Nadezhda said. 'He'll just say it's disinformation! People understand that nowadays.'

Lessner then threw the bundle on Nadezhda's dresser and whispered into her face.

'Better not let anyone see it! Remember, there is a lot more where this came from. We understand you have to keep up with the well heeled to find entry into their circles and participate. What we paid Nikolay so far was a pittance, we came to realise. Congratulations Madame, you are in a win-win situation. You are handsomely rewarded, when you collect points towards Skoblin's pardon.'

They stood there, motionless and silent. Lessner grinned and Nadezhda looked at the floor.

'Pick it up,' Lessner said after a few moments. 'I am not leaving until you put it into a safe place.'

Nadezhda still did not move.

'Should I put it where the Gypsy girls get their tips, Katya?'

She reached for the money. 'Please leave, I cannot stand the sight of you any longer.'

'Don't be so brash, Katya,' Lessner smiled viciously. 'I'll go back to my table and for the next bracket I request *Souliko* from the concertmeister. It is Stalin's favourite, as you have discovered, and we will both think of him when you sing it.' ...

..... *Paris, 1936*

As autumn wore on, Nadezhda suggested they go to Nice for Christmas.

'We ought to catch up with the folks there,' she said.

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But Nikolay shook his head. 'No way, they plan a big operation, our last operation. They have even sent people from Moscow to handle parts of it. That's how big it is. And incidentally, they promised me it would be our last. Then I will be pardoned. We can go home after that. If we still want to, that is!'

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Nikolay brought new papers to decipher and study every day. He became more and more absent minded, sometimes even burning papers by mistake.

Every time Nadezhda asked him about something, he said, 'Not now.'

Nadezhda became worried and remembered the 'big operation'. At first, Skoblin stonewalled, but when Nadezhda insisted, she needed to know, he explained.

'I have to meet Spiegelglass in Egreville in November, then we'll know more.'

Afterwards he flicked through piles of papers and spread them all over the table. Nadezhda saw he was nervous, close to panic even.

Nadezhda sat down at the other end of the table and turned one sheet around so she could read.

'Oh my goodness, this looks very involved. I thought things like that were over.'

'No, unfortunately not.' Nikolay answered. 'The town is crawling with operatives. They plan and revise constantly. This time they're making me nervous. If they hadn't assured me it would be our last operation, and after that we'd go home, I would change my name and take off to Brazil, honestly.'

'What in God's name is that operation?' Nadezhda asked fearful. 'It looks like a double abduction to me,' she said and handed the paper back to Nikolay. He was engrossed in reading

another document, shaking his head and too absorbed to answer.

‘What is it?’ Nadezhda insisted impatiently.

‘A conspiracy,’ Nikolay said in a half whisper.

Nadezhda stared at Nikolay. ‘Isn’t every abduction some kind of conspiracy?’ she asked with a touch of sarcasm.

Instead of answering, Nikolay kept reading. He was completely absorbed and frequently shook his head. Then he sorted the pages in front of him into two piles, looked over the table to see if he had forgotten any, and slid everything back into the envelopes, flicking cigarette ash nervously off with his sleeve.

‘One is for Miller. He’ll be interested to see that Marshal Tukhachevsky and his supporters are planning to overthrow the Georgian. If it’s genuine, it’s dynamite. I’ll take it upstairs for the night. Tomorrow I’ll go to the office and leave it with Miller. It’s too hot to keep.’



Preface

LA PLEVITSKAYA is a historical novel about the multilayered life of Gypsy singer Nadezhda Vassilievna Plevitskaya (1884 -1940). It contains historical events that happened in her life and in her lifetime. It includes characters she knew and others she must have known.

I first came across Plevitskaya in a biography about Serguey Rakhmaninoff some years ago. The more I researched her life the more intrigued I became. Originally, I thought it might make a spectacular movie, but that was not to be. So I embarked on the long journey to write this novel, which spans four decades, based on Plevitskaya’s life. In her successful years in Tsarist Russia, Plevitskaya was fondly known as the ‘Kursk Nightingale’, ‘The Great Plevitskaya’, and ‘Dyoshka’, Sweetie. But her life changed on every level.

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History and fiction intertwine in LA PLEVITSKAYA which was written to delight, entertain, and astound. The fictional scenes, developed from rudimentary facts in history books, might have happened as recreated or they might have happened in a similar way, considering a performer's experiences in the times she lived.

My gratitude goes to the Kensington & Norwood Writers' Group, whose enthusiasm for my work kept me from throwing in the towel. Free access to the State Library of South Australia and Adelaide University's Barr Smith Library also made vital contributions to LA PLEVITSKAYA. I also researched on the internet in three languages. Listening to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's radio channel 'Classic FM' reminded me which Russian folktunes were used in which classical works. In my book, Plevitskaya was to sing the tunes that the great classical composers used in their works. As I discovered later, she actually recorded some of these.

My husband Dieter Hauptmann put up with me during the research, writing, and editing phases, thank you.

Learning to play the bass balalaika in our Russian folk group 'Hot Zakuski' was an unplanned activity that descended on me in the middle of my work. While it delayed the book's completion, it drew me right back into the vortex of my topic.

My gratitude also goes to Ms Lynette Arden who corrected wrong prepositions and other mistakes which creep in when English is not your first language. I am further indebted to Mr. Valeryi Filatov for his review. This edition contains an updated relationship diagram.

The aftershocks of the Russian Revolution caught up with me half a world away in Australia. Since I became a victim of privatisation fraud committed by the German Government as 'Chancellor Matter' in 1994, Stalin's propaganda banners seen in my childhood days in East Berlin, appeared before my inner vision.

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As I tried in vain to claim my rights, I was disturbed to find that Stalin's vilification of a malicious 'Ruling Class' was not a figment of his imagination. The ruling clique in the Bundestag, the Kohl Government, the CDU party, and big business abused their power exactly as Stalin's propaganda had described.



I therefore dedicate 'La Plevitskaya'

To the memory of

**Prenzlauer Promenade 191
824 square metres of land and building
in Berlin (Pankow)**

- » owned by my Grandmother Valeska Gurski
and my Father Walter Bruno Gurski
– since 1928
- » torched by the Red Army
– in May 1945
- » taken into use as a Minol gas station
by the communists
– in September 1965
- » wangled to the French oil company elf Aquitaine
(now TOTAL SA) through the 'Chancellor Matter'
Leuna-Minol deal
– in December 1994
- » denying me compensation of any kind,
filling the ruling clique's Swiss bank accounts.

Corruption is not a victimless crime

*Ally (Almuth Irrntraut) Hauptmann-Gurski
Adelaide, South Australia, 2006*

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