

ROMM

by

Julius Wachtel

Derpt, the Russian Empire, 1881

“Your Highness, no! Stay in the carriage!”

The odor! Is it sulfur? Hard to breathe...my eyes...door jammed...

“Highness, please!”

Coachman, out of my way! My dear Cossack, I'm frightfully sorry. Please hold on, help is coming. Oh God, be merciful!

Fourteen years earlier, at a quarry in the English countryside, the inventor whose name is synonymous with world peace demonstrated a powerful new explosive. Produced by mixing nitroglycerin with a filler, dynamite would make Alfred Nobel a wealthy and in time deeply remorseful man. His marvelous creation transformed the extraction of the earth's bounty and the building of public works, making them far more efficient and economic. It also enabled waves of fanatics, including a vanguard of Russian revolutionaries known as “The People's Will,” to multiply their force in exceedingly lethal ways.

Dynamite is a bulky product. As ingeniously packaged as the crude bombs were, the only available delivery method – run up and toss – was inaccurate and nearly always suicidal. And when the poorly-aimed missile landed under the coach, killing a horseman and wounding several passers-by but failing to harm its target, the mission seemed failed. Then the unexpected happened. Although he had been forewarned that assassins were on his trail, Alexander II, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias, inexplicably exited his armored carriage and, ignoring the coachman's frantic plea, made his way through the grisly scene to comfort a dying Cossack,

still astride his disemboweled mount. That's when terrorist number two lunged forward with a second bomb and set it off right then and there, thus joining the "Reform Czar" in eternity.

"George Davidovich!"

Of medium height, stout but not overly so, with dark hair and soft, nearly feminine features, George Romm was enrolled in a medical school not far from the capital, at the Imperial University of Derpt (now Tartu, Estonia.) Older at twenty-six and far more mature than most of his classmates, nearly all spoiled children of the elite, George enjoyed sparring with the comically stern German professors who formed the core of the distinguished institution's faculty. And they in turn never passed on an opportunity to test the scion of the famous Romm publishing house of Vilna.

George stood. His white smock fell neatly to his side. "Herr Professor."

"Tell us about typhus, young man." Nothing in the Empire was more feared than the notorious louse-borne disease, a pestilence whose only saving grace was that it decimated Napoleon's invading army some seventy years earlier.

George gathered his thoughts. "When humans scratch the bite from an infected louse, the organism's fecal matter is brought into the bloodstream. Symptoms progress from headache and cough to chest pain, high fever and vomiting...a rash spreads...um..."

Doctor Müller seemed annoyed. "You sound like a layperson, young man," he scolded. "We expect much more from a medical student, even if only in the first year."

George was summoned to the professor's office at the end of the day.

"Please sit down, Herr Romm." Müller opened his grade book. "Your exam scores remain acceptable but not excellent as earlier in the term, and these undigested responses are getting me worried. If you're trying to be an ordinary student you're about to succeed."

“Please accept my apologies, Herr Professor. I’ve been distracted.”

“Apparently, so has your roommate. Look, Romm, I understand your situation. Keep in mind that Lutherans aren’t much more popular with the authorities than your kind. They pretend to like us, and we pretend to believe it. That will probably go on as long as the Empire has a pressing need for German professors and Jewish students. So as long as you’re here I suggest that you concentrate your attention on things over which you can realistically control, meaning your studies.”

George realized that the professor was right. Over dinner – the scholar had graciously invited his precocious pupil to his home – they discussed the bleak circumstances that ethnic and religious minorities again faced in Imperial Russia. Under the murdered Czar the Empire experienced a wave of liberalizations, culminating in the freeing of the serfs in 1881. Restrictive university admissions quotas were relaxed, allowing all who qualified to receive fine educations. But the assassination reawakened a long-simmering intolerance. Although only one of the terrorists, Gesya Gelfman, was in fact Jewish, and her role limited to renting the apartment where the explosives were stored, pogroms engulfed rural Russia. Perhaps the worst of the troubles struck in Elizavetgrad (later Kirovohrad, Ukraine), a town named after Peter the Great’s lethal offspring Elizaveta Petrovna. In one of her best-known royal *ukases*, the Empress had ordered the expulsion from the Empire of all the “enemies of Christ” who did not promptly convert.

Hence the Empress most graciously commands that from our whole Empire...all Jews of the male and female sex, of whatever calling and dignity they may be, shall at the publication of this our ukase, be immediately deported with all their property abroad, and

shall henceforward, under no pretext, be admitted into our Empire for any purpose, unless they should be willing to accept the Christian religion of the Greek persuasion.

Popular disgust with the assassination empowered Alexander III to proclaim laws authorizing secret trials and granting police the authority to summarily banish political troublemakers. But despite the repressions, a sense of normalcy was never restored. As the *Okhrana*, the Empire's viciously effective secret police, hunted down the remnants of the People's Will, a fresh crop of revolutionaries imbued with the precepts of a radical German economist came on the scene. Naturally, the new sovereign was number one on their hit list.

Still, Doctor Müller was hopeful. Certainly the sovereign wasn't so stupid that he would wreck his own home. Come what may, he was convinced that smart people would always be in style. George wasn't as sure.

When the budding physician returned to the dormitory he found his roommate reading by the light of a flickering gas lamp. Thin, sallow and much too socially conscious for his own good, Efim was the son of an aging Saint Petersburg physician who was eager to pass on his practice to the youth. An excellent student when he wasn't devouring political tracts, Efim had of late been spending far more time with the writings of Marx than with his textbooks.

"George, where have you been? We worried at supper that you had finally murdered the old goat!"

It was bitterly cold and fuel was in short supply. George left on his coat and pulled up a stool. "Professor Müller took pity and had me to his home for dinner. His wife stuffed me full of wurst." His eyes fell on the book in Efim's hands. Its cover depicted a busty young woman in a flimsy peasant's dress.

Efim smiled sheepishly. He opened the volume to reveal that it had been hollowed out. Tucked inside was a copy of “What is to be Done?”, a banned tract by the notorious radical Chernyshevsky.

“Nikolay Gavrilovich was from the same revolutionary cell as the heroes who dispatched the Czar,” Efim said. “He would have been there, too, except that at the time he was taking a little ‘vacation’ in Siberia.”

George shook his head in amazement. Like many other revolutionaries Chernyshevsky fancied himself a populist, an instrument of the masses. He and his fellow radicals justified the most reprehensible acts. Was that the direction in which his roommate was heading?

“Efim Mikhailovich, this literary hero of yours, counsels murder. Our chosen vocation is to heal. And you know full well the punishment for concealing this murderous trash.”

“Yes, yes, I know. It’s worse than being caught with it in the open. Look, in another day it won’t matter. I’ll be leaving this esteemed institution in your hands and those of your fellow slaves.”

George wasn’t completely surprised. Soon after arriving at the university Efim sought out a leftist clique, then managed to radicalize himself in record time. George also felt the burden of privilege, and had decided to shed the weight by dedicating himself to working in hospitals. Efim, it seemed, was intent on a more comprehensive solution.

Both took to their cots still clothed. It was the weekend, and there would be time to wash in the morning. “Did Herr Müller say anything about me?” Efim asked.

“He was concerned about your grades.” George paused, uncertain whether to continue.

Efim sensed that something interesting was being left unsaid. “To the Devil with my grades! Come on, spill it!”

“It seems that us Jews have company. The after-effects of the assassination have arrived at the House of Luther.”

Efim bolted up. “What have I been telling you? An official pogrom! Those bigots were just waiting for an excuse to Russify! No more instruction in German. Then no more German instructors. Then if the Czar has his way, no more Germany. Kaput! Then...”

George gave up on sleep. “Then us. Müller doesn’t think it will go that far. He’s convinced that the authorities won’t shoot themselves in the foot. But I’m not so sure that logic will prevail. You know that they’ve done nothing to stop the pogroms. My mother and uncles are plenty worried about what will happen.”

“Your family is as loyal as they come, George. There’s no way that the Czar will let the rabble lay a finger on the famous Romm house of Vilna.”

“Let’s drink to your being right!” George fetched a hidden bottle. He poured for both.

Efim greedily downed a shot. His face contorted. “It’s like sugared charcoal!”

George refilled the tumblers. “Brandy, supposedly from the Vatican’s own cellars. I’ll tell you the story one day. But first explain yourself. Why leave? Your father has a thriving practice.”

“Medicine changes lives. Politics changes history.”

“Is that what you and your colleagues intend to do? Change history? Are you so certain that your cause justifies violence? Or is it about being the last dog to pee on the tree? Look at our own history, Efim: all that’s ever been accomplished through such means is to substitute one set of tyrants for another.”

Efim smiled. “You have a way of injecting the vernacular into the most intellectual debates, George Davidovich. But I can’t deny the dilemma. Those who would use force are

probably the ones who should be least entrusted with it.” He blew out the lamp. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

Vilna, 1884

George watched as his mother took Sofia on a tour of the printing house. He felt incredibly lucky. He proposed shortly after graduating from medical school, and to no one's surprise – except perhaps his – she readily assented. Sofia was talented and beautiful. But what first drew his attention had nothing to do with her sparkling eyes or slender figure. Two years earlier, while on break from the university, he was visiting friends in Moscow when after a few rounds of pepper vodka they dragged him to a party at the home of a wealthy merchant. As soon as they entered – really, even before the valet took his coat – George was entranced by a remarkable melody. Without waiting for his companions he set off to find the source of the beguiling sounds, and as he came closer he smoothed his shirt and adjusted his tie as though preparing for the encounter that would change his life.

George entered the crowded drawing room just as an exquisite young woman gracefully lifted her hands from the keyboard of a gleaming Steinway. While curtsying to the applause she happened to glance in his direction. Her innocent gesture drove George to ecstasy. Later, when his amused friends formally introduced the pair – “Sofia Evseena, may we present your fervent admirer and future medical genius, George Davidovich Romm” – their mischievous turn of phrase caused George to blush a violent crimson. Sofia, who was not ignorant of her effect on young men, extended her hand.

“You must be a fan of Tchaikovsky, George Davidovich.”

“Only as you perform it, Sofia Evseena.”

Sofia, the merchant's daughter, broke into a wide grin. Her future husband grinned back.

George's mother paused by a shelf displaying the printing house's latest titles. She selected a slim volume. It was a popular French novel, *Les Mystères de Paris*, translated into Hebrew.

"Here's something that you might enjoy."

Sofia happily accepted the book. "I didn't know that you published popular literature."

"We normally don't," Deborah Romm replied, glancing at her son. "My late husband, may his soul be bound in the bond of life, acquired the rights and had it translated. He thought it would help defray the great expense of the *shas*. Now if you'll excuse me," she added, "I must go check on dinner."

Deborah left. Sofia turned to George. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Don't evade my question, dear husband. Your mother was trying to clue me into something."

Time had come to convey the rest of the story. "Mother was referring to the Babylonian Talmud, father's pet project. My brothers and I thought it was a fantastic idea. But after recruiting all those scholars to write original commentaries, sending representatives to the Vatican to borrow an original manuscript, which of course had to be translated into Hebrew, then proofreading everything in the Romm tradition, meaning at least three times, the project's deep in the red."

"How many were sold?"

"More than twenty thousand. And it's still not enough," George sighed. "We have confirmed deposits for another ten thousand and a new manager to help keep costs down, so

hopefully... Anyway, mother is determined to do a lot better than get back our investment. My uncles have families. And now that the news is out every petty official in the Empire..."

"What news?"

"It's what my brothers were mumbling about during dinner. They're worried that once they've greased all the official palms getting exit visas there won't be enough left over to buy steamship tickets."

George's surprises were coming at an alarming clip. "They're going somewhere?"

"Sure. To America."

Hours later Sofia was reading her new mystery by candlelight.

What's a "*zonah*?"

George groaned. "It means *whore*, Sofia. Look – this is a publishing house: there are dictionaries everywhere. Now please let me sleep."

Sofia ignored him. "I thought so! Did you know that she's one of the main characters? The hero rescues her from a..."

"Pimp."

Sofia playfully batted him with the volume. "You lied to me! You've read it!"

George couldn't help but smile. "Efim Mikhailovich, my first roommate in medical school, was a great fan of *Les Mystères*. He said it was a call to revolution. Its author apparently didn't think that the first one accomplished much."

"Really? But the hero is a wealthy nobleman."

"He's supposed to be an exception, one of the few with class consciousness. Efim said that Eugène Sue used him to expose how the privileged stay that way, by exploiting the workers and ignoring the poor."

Sofia frowned. "I'm not sure I understand. Like you said, this Rodolphe is enlightened, so it makes sense that he would do good deeds for the less fortunate."

"That's supposedly the point," George replied, somewhat testily. "Why should it be necessary for a secret nobleman from another land to step in? Why can't France – or Russia, for that matter – take care of their own?"

As a child Sofia liked to help the servants with their chores, which amused everyone until she kept it up in her teens, forcing her parents to make her stop because it made the staff uneasy. She had always wondered why everyone wasn't well off, or at least equally miserable. But whenever she asked her father about the gap between rich and poor he replied in the same, detached way. Everyone had a role. Some people were destined to be maids, others butlers and cooks. She was best suited to be a pianist. Her mother was most productive as a homemaker, and he, as an international trader. Their material lives had been preordained, their fortune affording each family member the opportunity to serve God in the manner that He intended.

George, on the other hand, couldn't be any more different. For all his protestations about being a nonpolitical, "scientific" man, her husband frequently criticized how poorly the Empire treated its less fortunate citizens, forcing them to endure the indignities of overcrowded charity wards where disease was rampant and the quality of care excruciatingly low. George and her father frequently quarreled about such things. Their disagreement wasn't over the disparities themselves, which were plain for everyone to see, but about the wisdom of raising such a fuss over things that one couldn't hope to influence. Her father liked George but worried that their ethnicity and his outspokenness could prove a dangerous combination.

George softly caressed Sofia's belly, his touch confirming the unmistakable signs of new life. When they met he assumed that she would admire his egalitarian bent, and when it didn't

work out that way he was quietly disappointed. But Sofia had enough on her mind, and he felt badly about having lectured her over the book. Maybe she was only being realistic.

“Look, Sofia, we were born into privilege, and God willing our children will not be the lesser for it. Your father and I have had our quarrels, but there’s one thing we agree on: there’s absolutely no place for violence.”

Sofia softly kissed her man’s cheek. She blew out the candle. It was time for sleep.

St. Petersburg, 1887

Inspector Bazarov wearily shook his head. “Kolya, every day there are rumors of a plot. If we had to investigate them all we’d be paralyzed. Please, calm down and tell me what you have.”

In the *Okhrana*, the Czar’s secret police, no mission was more important than protecting the Emperor of all the Russias. But resources were finite even for Bazarov’s elite plainclothes squad. While they didn’t personally shield the Czar – that was a job for the Cossacks – their task was far more complex. It was to monitor the radicals who posed the greatest threat. And at the top of the list were the remnants of the *Narodnaya Volya*, the populist assassins who murdered Alexander II.

“I agree completely, Inspector,” the young agent said. He knew that there was little the boss hated more than an agitated underling. Or one who sat without being asked even if there had been a chair. “But our source is of the highest quality. Do you remember that Greek informer, the one who tipped us off about the *narodnik* who sliced the throat of militiaman...”

“Golovkin, may his Soul rest in peace,” the inspector snickered. “We expended so much ammunition during that...ah... *capture* that I had to cancel our next practice.” Bazarov twirled the cylinder of the model 1882 revolver he had been cleaning. A lovely firearm, double-action, six rounds, it fired a thirty-caliber projectile that didn’t have to be perfectly placed to bring a man down. The weapon was a gift from his counterparts in the Swiss security police, who were eager for intelligence about the wild-eyed Russians who were relentlessly spreading Marxist poison in *la confédération helvétique*.

Bazarov finished oiling the gun. He slid it into its holster. “So, what did our Hellenic friend have to say?”

“Well, he was in a tavern drinking some...ah, I think it was schnapps...”

His boss sighed. “Kolya, please!”

“Sorry. Anyway, the Greek got to talking with a fellow about my age. It turns out that he had been a medical student but left before graduating. They downed a few shots. Then it turned out that the young man was broke. Well, the barkeep was about to apply some ‘persuasion’ when the Greek took pity on his new friend and settled the bill.”

“Kolya, my eyelids are getting heavy.”

“I’m coming to it! They took a table, and over the next hour this fellow poured out his heart about all the injustices against the workers, the pitiful situation of the peasants, blah, blah, blah. You know, the usual populist garbage. Then – and here’s the juicy part – he hinted that, no matter, justice would soon be done.”

Bazarov’s ears pricked. He leaned forward. “Justice? What did he mean by that?”

“He didn’t say, but it doesn’t sound like they intended to file an official complaint.”

Kolya instantly regretted his ill-chosen words. Possible threats to the emperor were nothing to make jokes about, and especially not with the straight-laced inspector.

Bazarov glared. “Go on.”

“Naturally the Greek remembered your generosity from last time, so he told the fool – he didn’t remember the man’s name, but it sounded Jewish – that he also hates the czar and offered to help in any way possible. The young man was noncommittal, but agreed to meet again tomorrow, at noon.”

Many of the legal rights enacted under Alexander II were suspended after his assassination. Those accused of terrorism wound up in military courts, where the judgment and sentence were for all purposes predetermined. Executions ramped up and many top revolutionaries were liquidated, scaring off recruits, or at least those sufficiently mentally balanced to calculate the odds. While isolated attacks against government officials continued, the Okhrana agents were finding the pickings slim, fueling concern that the team could be disbanded. Bazarov had little patience for activity for its own sake, but considering everything he thought it prudent to open a case. Gathering evidence against this incompetent would be easy, and there was nothing like a splashy arrest to boost the unit's standing.

At the appointed time agents watched as the Greek and his dupe drank, then drank some more. It was late afternoon before they parted. Kolya and his supervisor left immediately to meet with the informer.

"His name is Efim," the Greek said. "He's been running around with politicals but still lives at home. His father, a doctor, has basically written him off. His mother sneaks him money when she can."

It made sense, Bazarov thought. Most *Narodniks* were spoiled upper class scoundrels. "Did he say what his friends are planning?"

"You know that I offered to help. He told me straight off that was impossible because his friends are terribly afraid of informers." The Greek leaned in and his voice dropped. "They're planning to ambush the czar at a place where he's normally let out. They've got several bombs, and several of the young fools have already pledged their lives to the cause."

Bazarov was skeptical. "If they think they're going to do it in the Kremlin..."

"No, no. Not inside the walls. Where, he wouldn't say. Believe me, I tried."

As far as the inspector knew, the czar never left his carriage except at an official destination, and then only under heavy guard. What could the exception be?

Kolya and his supervisor exchanged a quick glance. Most conspiracies were revolutionary daydreams and easily discounted. Not this one. What the Greek had conveyed was fragmentary, yet disturbing. Not even God would help them if the czar got blown up while they were at home relaxing with their spouses.

Bazarov and Kolya sprinted past startled guards and headed deep into the bowels of the Ministry. One of the interrogation rooms was in use. Efim was hanging by the ankles, his wrists bound behind his back. His face looked like a spoiled melon, the obvious product of a merciless thrashing.

An agent came out. "We snatched him a few blocks from the tavern, Inspector. He's a tough one. All he wants to do is invent new curses."

"Bring him down," Bazarov ordered. "We'll take it from here."

Agents tied the would-be radical to a chair. Kolya and the inspector pulled up close. Minutes passed by.

Efim finally broke the silence. "They...beat...me..."

"That's why we're here, Efim Mikhailovich," the inspector said. "To make sure that no further harm comes to you. Or your family."

An eyelid quivered as though it might open. "Family...?"

Bazarov frequently dealt with prideful men. Many couldn't bring themselves to give in until their necks were in the noose. An oblique approach often yielded better results.

Collaborating was much easier to justify to oneself when the purpose was to save others.

“Young man, be realistic,” the inspector whispered, shifting closer so that their knees touched. “Do you not realize what will happen to your family if you don’t cooperate?”

“But...I...don’t...know...any...”

“Please, don’t. It only makes telling the truth harder. I’m Inspector Bazarov with the *Okhrana* special services department. This,” he said, gesturing at Kolya, “is my top deputy. We’re your family’s last hope, my friend.” Bazarov took out his pocket watch. “In five and one-half hours you will appear before a military tribunal. If I report that you’ve been cooperative, they will order you detained until the investigation is complete. Your family will not be molested. Otherwise you will be immediately hanged. I will publicly announce your demise as well as the arrests of your parents, grandparents and siblings, all of whom will be transported to Siberian labor camps. In case you don’t know, that’s now done administratively – it doesn’t require a judicial order. With luck all the commotion will disrupt your colleagues’ plans and give us time to find another insider such as yourself, but smarter.” Bazarov gently placed his hand on Efim’s shoulder. “I apologize for the crude measures. But please understand our position. We’re charged with protecting the sovereign, and this is the best we can do on short notice.”

Hours later, as dawn broke over Saint Petersburg, Bazarov and Kolya were still trying to sort things out. Unless Efim was another Lucien Guitry, his stunning, tearful admission that all he knew was second-hand was no act. It wasn’t like radical cells were accepting applications, and despite his best efforts all he had managed to accomplish was befriend a single *Narodnik*, whom he only knew as “Vasili.” No, he didn’t know where this “Vasili” lived – his one attempt to find out was quickly rebuffed – but Efim begged for a chance to search for the man, whom he was sure he could find in a week.

“So,” Kolya asked, “should we put him to work?”

“I suppose.” Bazarov began making his report. “What’s the date?”

“First of March, Inspector.”

Bazarov was stunned. “*What* did you say?”

“March 1st. February only has...”

“Kolya, when was Alexander II murdered?”

“In 1881, of course.”

“*When* in 1881?”

Kolya felt his pulse quicken. “March 1st, Inspector.”

Bazarov’s mind raced. Assassins could of course strike anytime. Was there something special about the sixth anniversary? About *any* anniversary? It was Sunday. Bazarov remembered that he had promised to accompany his family to Mass.

That was it! “My God, Kolya, it’s on this day, the anniversary of his father’s death, when Alexander III visits churches along the Nevsky!”

*

“Is this the residence of George Davidovich Romm?”

A tall, impeccably dressed middle-aged man was at the door. His appearance was somewhat familiar, Romm thought. By the way his hands trembled, he also seemed to have a bad case of the nerves.

“That’s me,” George said.

“I’m Doctor Mikhail Rabinovitch,” the stranger announced, presenting his calling card.

“You might know me as Efim’s father.”

Sofia brought out the samovar. Over tea, Efim's father explained the dilemma that prompted his unexpected visit. "You've heard," he asked, "of the would-be assassins who were arrested earlier today?"

"Our neighbors mentioned it when they returned from services," George replied. "Three youths with bombs were caught outside a church on the Nevsky Prospect shortly before the czar's carriage pulled up."

Rabinovitch nervously gulped his drink. "What the authorities are keeping secret is that the plot failed thanks to my son. A conspirator had told him about the plan, and Efim pointed the man out to the authorities before anything could happen. You could truthfully say that he saved the emperor's life."

It took a moment for George to collect his thoughts. "I got to know Efim quite well, Doctor Rabinovitch. You're certain that...?"

"I assure you," the father insisted, "that Efim was not involved. Look, I'm well aware of my boy's radical tendencies. You can imagine our heartache when he dropped out of medical college so that he could go save the world. But Efim would absolutely not participate in murder. I just returned from police headquarters. Even the Okhrana inspector agrees that Efim had no role in the attempt, that is, other than to alert the authorities."

"I don't understand, doctor," Sofia interjected. "If he's not involved, then why...?"

"Because they want to make an example of as many as possible. They're court-martialing them! Just as I left Efim was being transferred to military custody. They're set to try these boys as soon as next week, and I can't get a straight answer as whether that will include my son. Everyone already knows that they'll hang! And not months from now but as soon as they can ready the scaffold!"

George was alarmed. "Have you pled your case with any officials...?"

"You want to know the irony? The murdered czar was my hero! Thanks to him all that Jews needed to go to university were good grades on the entrance exams. Until now my skills have carried me along. I've never needed a 'fixer'."

Sofia grew angry. "My husband is not a 'fixer,' doctor. He's also struggled..."

Efim's father looked stricken. "I meant no offense. It's just that my son..."

George put his arm around the frightened man. "Please, tell us what you need."

"I lack a Royal rank, Doctor Romm. You have a wonderful reputation, and your family is famous, not just in Russia but throughout Eastern Europe. All the gossips speak of the splendid parties, the guests with uniforms and medals. Perhaps you might know someone?"

Two weeks later five youths, not including Efim, were hanged for plotting to assassinate Alexander III. Among them was Alexander Ulyanov, 21, the older brother of a budding revolutionary whom history would know as Lenin.

Saint Petersburg, 1895

A hack rounded a corner not far from the Winter Palace. Its only passenger was a stout, well dressed man in his early thirties, with dark, deeply set eyes and a pleasant round face marred only by the stubble of a grueling fourteen-hour train ride from Petrozavodsk. His gaze drifted to an angel nearly fifty meters above. Perched on the apex of a massive granite column, the heavenly representation of Alexander I holding the Cross stood guard over a ring of museums and government buildings that in sheer size and grandeur were the equal of anything in Europe, indeed, of anywhere on Earth. More than just an architectural showcase, the neoclassical extravaganza known as Palace Square was meant as a warning to all who might doubt the Empire's might and resilience. But to those who had experienced the entrenched, soul-crushing poverty of rural Russia, the greatest triumph was that such a backwards land could manage the feat in the first place.

As a boy George Romm had never failed to be stirred by the majestic scene, but after his experiences in the countryside the sight served as a powerful reminder of the royals' hopeless conceit, a detachment so extreme that nobles thought nothing of erecting palaces wherever they chose so that they, their children and grandchildren could vacation in luxury whenever they pleased. In time the good doctor would reluctantly conclude that the aristocracy's love of privilege and distaste for hard work made it exceedingly unlikely that it would ever share the land's bounty, to say nothing of peacefully relinquishing control. If a remedy was to be found it would have to lie elsewhere.

But the skilled surgeon's political transformation was yet to come. George Romm's ethnicity, a touchy subject after the czar's assassination, had yet to impede his advancement.

After graduation he was assigned to a hospital in the bustling provincial capital, then rose to second in command in five years. Two years later he was inducted into the non-hereditary nobility with the title of Collegiate Assessor, comparable to a captain in the military, and additional promotions seemed assured. There seemed to be no limit to what he could achieve.

In Russia “bustling” usually meant filthy and overcrowded, and that was doubly so in the provinces, so George decided that Sofia and the boys – Evsey had just turned ten and Alexander was eight – would remain at the splendid Saint Petersburg flat that his father-in-law gifted to the couple on the eve of their wedding. George visited when he could, usually once each month. But this time his return was special. A year earlier he requested and was granted a transfer to the hospital in his hometown, Vilna. Within a few months he was its medical director, having assumed the top post on an acting basis after the chief physician retired. To be confirmed as the new head required the Provincial Governor’s formal assent, but George’s superiors in the capital assured him that it was a mere formality, his exemplary record, noble rank and ties to the community making it inevitable. He had spent the past weeks feverishly fixing up his apartment, which would house the family until Sofia found more suitable quarters. George’s next train ride would be with his family. He couldn’t wait.

Alexander’s column was still in view when the coach pulled up to an elegant stone building. Within moments a well turned-out, grey haired butler rushed out.

“Your Honor! We expected you earlier!”

“Yasha, how wonderful to see you!” Ignoring his servant’s attempt at a dignified greeting, George grabbed him in a bear-hug. “Where are the ladies?”

“They’re entertaining the guests,” the butler replied, amused as always by his employer’s exuberant displays of affection. “You might as well know: your wife is throwing you a party! I would have warned you this morning but you weren’t at the station.”

“I’m sorry. I had an emergency surgery at the hospital and caught a later train.”

Yasha (his name was Yakov, hence the diminutive) took his master’s suitcases inside. Working for the Romms was truly a gift. Desperate for work after the death of a previous employer, he and Zhenya were introduced to the newlyweds by a friend who was in service to the in-laws. Truly, the circumstances couldn’t be any more different. While there was no question as to who was servant and who was master at the other household, Yasha and his wife were treated with such dignity and respect that it seemed only one family lived at the home instead of two. To avoid a sin they had asked their priest whether it was permissible to pray for the salvation of honorable persons of the Jewish persuasion. Reassured by the bemused cleric that Saint Andrew would have thought the effort worthwhile, the grateful couple did so at each Mass. Naturally they didn’t dare mention it to their employer, but there was no question that in short time, at one residence in Saint Petersburg, the gap between Orthodox and Jew, indeed, between servant and master virtually disappeared.

Yasha helped George with his topcoat. Soon the melodic strains of a piano overture wafted into the vestibule. “Rachmaninoff, Concerto Number One. Your wife has been practicing it for weeks.”

George’s eyes misted. There was no denying the memories the music stirred of a similar gathering not so long ago, then the glorious weeks and months that followed as a man and woman, once strangers, yielded to the rhythms of life. Their prolonged separation hadn’t been part of the plan, yet in the years following Alexander II’s assassination, as authorities tightened

the wise on the non-Orthodox, obtaining a position in the capital became more difficult even for privileged, educated Jews like Doctor Romm. But as his superiors never failed to point out, he was lucky to draw an assignment that allowed frequent visits. George resisted becoming bitter. With a wife and two children he had far more to lose than his unattached brothers in Vilna who had become active in the underground Marxist organization known as the *Bund*. Had someone suggested that he would in time throw caution to the wind and find himself imprisoned for arguing the notions of a pretentious German economist, George would have thought them mad.

The music stopped. A woman's heels clattered across the parquet.

"Darling! When did you arrive? You almost missed your party!" Sofia hurried to his side. Few men were unaffected by this lovely woman with sparkling blue eyes, her thick auburn hair coiffed in the latest style, not so different in length from a man's and for that reason all the more beguiling. But what drew the most notice, and every male's eye, was the way in which her slender, unadorned neck rose from that daringly open bodice, its décolletage rescued from the brink of sinfulness by the merest wisp of lace.

Yasha glanced away as the couple brushed lips. He and his wife, both devotedly Orthodox, had shared the same bed for nearly forty years, and not once had he ever thought of straying. That wasn't how things played out in Saint Petersburg's upper crust, for whom illicit liaisons seemed as vital as a set of brushes to a painter. Half the guests at his employer's surprise welcome-home party were accompanied by someone other than their spouses. But what most exasperated the butler was his mistress's lack of discretion. Her "special friend" even came to the party! Of course, Yasha had turned him right around, delivering a sharp but discreet poke in the ribs with the authority of someone whose youth was spent on the streets. Order and propriety were the touchstones of civilized life. There would be no unseemly encounters on his watch!

“Where are Evsey and Sasha?” George asked. Normally the children would already be clambering up his legs.

“They’re with their grandparents for the night, darling. Come, let’s join the others,” she added, leading her husband across a gleaming sea of freshly-laid floor tiles. Craftsmen commissioned by her father had spent weeks assembling the intricate, fleur-de-lis mosaic. “Isn’t it beautiful? A noble family was erecting a new vacation home, but with all the unrest those plans are off. They were gathering dust in papa’s warehouse and he thought we might enjoy them. Who knew that you’d be promoted so quickly?”

“Remember what I wrote,” George scolded, quietly appalled at the expense. “It’s only a temporary rank. Governor Von Wahl has yet to approve.”

The admonishment had little effect. “I’m sure it’s only a matter of time, sweetheart,” she reassured, threading her arm through his.

“To George Davidovich!” Two dozen finely-attired members of Saint Petersburg’s upper crust raised their goblets as the esteemed physician and his wife entered the exquisitely appointed drawing room. Decorated in the latest French style, it featured yards of richly brocaded curtains, a gleaming Steinway and, hovering overhead, a spectacular chandelier. A symphony of artfully cut Russian crystal, it had been purchased by Sofia’s dotting father directly from the workshops of the famed silversmith Mischakov.

George greeted the guests. Each time he visited his wife’s coterie grew less and less familiar. He recognized her sometime piano coach. Pauline Viardot normally made her home in France. Improbable as it seemed, the homely, broad-hipped woman had kept both her husband and her lover, the late novelist Ivan Turgenev, in the same home. One can only imagine what they spoke of at breakfast.

“George Davidovich!” Viardot squealed, coquettishly offering her hand.

George brushed his lips against the matron’s gnarled fingers. He couldn’t help but notice that across her ample bosom rested a strand of pearls that would pay for a year’s worth of medicine for his wards. Hovering only inches away, his wife frowned. Perhaps his populist feelings had, as she suggested, turned into an unhealthy obsession. Or maybe it was true that they and their well-off friends had become little different from the rich, self-loathing characters of *Les Mystères*.

Sofia introduced a tall, stately man in a finely tailored waistcoat. A sash denoting his Imperial rank peeked out discreetly.

“Count Vasily Feodorovich Rogozin at your service, Doctor Romm.”

“I’m honored,” George replied, returning the bow.

Rogozin’s mustache quivered expectantly. “Your wife’s father is a great friend. So I was pleased to accede to his request.”

Sofia noticed her husband’s puzzled look. “Count Rogozin is acquainted with Vilna’s Governor-General,” she quickly explained. “He was kind enough to send His Excellency his endorsement. Isn’t that wonderful?”

George did his best to pretend being grateful to a man whom he had never met for performing a service that he had never asked. “It certainly is. Thank you very much, Count.”

“My pleasure, Doctor.” Rogozin clicked his heels and walked off.

So that was it, George thought. His father-in-law, who was no doubt lubricating the weasel’s palms on a regular basis, had him write a letter on fancy stationery asking that General Von Wahl confirm Romm’s advancement to chief physician. It was how business was done in the Empire, all right.

Sofia detected her husband's disquiet. Her husband was smart – and completely clueless. If she didn't promote their interests, who would? She took a spoon to glass.

The room quieted. All eyes fell on the hostess, who glowed in the attention.

“As you know,” Sofia began, “my dear husband has served the Empire for more than a decade, nearly all of it in the provinces. A few months ago he was appointed chief physician at the Vilna Jewish Hospital. As you know, Evsey, Alexander and I will soon be joining him. But there's another reason for this event,” she added, squeezing George's hand. “My husband is by far too modest to mention it, but I'm not, so I wish to take this opportunity to announce that in recognition of Doctor George Davidovich Romm's service to the people of Russia, His Imperial Majesty has advanced him to the rank of advisor in the Medical Collegium.”

George was now the equivalent of a major.

There was good reason why the applause took a moment to start. Shock. Alexander III, who had recently died of kidney failure, was replaced by his son, Nikolai Alexandrovich. Elevating someone of Romm's ethnicity to such lofty status was unusual even under the old regime, and the Empire's new ruler, the frosty, authoritarian-minded Nicholas II was not known for holding liberal views, actually quite the opposite. How the promotion actually came about, and by whose intercession, was the question on everyone's minds, but of course no one would be so impolite as to ask. Tongues in the capital would be wagging for a week!

Gossip about his rank in the nobility was George's least concern. Sofia's father had grown weary of the couple's seemingly blasé attitude about their separation, and his congratulatory letter about George's advancement to chief physician carried an implicit

warning that the time had come for the family to reunite. So in the end Romm had no option but to share his decision with a certain nurse.

A peasant girl from Ukraine, Rada was neither glamorous nor musically talented. Yet her dedication to serve the poor drew George's admiration from his first weeks as a new intern in Petrozavodsk. She cared about what was important, and he was flattered that in time it came to include him. Their relationship, at first collegial, then something more, was no secret to the staff, and when Doctor Romm transferred to Vilna there were whispers that Rada would soon follow. Had someone suggested years earlier that he would have been unfaithful to his wife he would have thought them mad. Now he pondered whether one could fall in love again. Self-absorbed in his duplicity, fearful of its discovery, he gave no thought to the possibility that his official soul-mate might be caught in a like predicament.

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As Governor of Vilna Province, General Victor Von Wahl was the principal overseer of the Pale of Settlement, a chunk of the Empire's western frontier that was home to nearly five million Jews. Getting permission to leave the Pale was once rare. But Alexander II eased the restrictions, allowing many better-educated Jews to resettle in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. His actions dismayed those who feared that the mores of the ideologically untrustworthy group would infect greater Russia. After his assassination authorities moved to correct what many considered a serious blunder, revoking residence permits and launching a reverse migration that overwhelmed the cities of the Pale.

General Von Wahl nervously stroked his beard. Flipping through a current intelligence report on Vilna's Jewish quarter, he skipped over the usual blather about the crowded, disease-

stricken conditions and the latest outbreak of typhus. It's not as though it was his fault! Actually, he *was* concerned about infection, albeit of a wholly different kind. At a time when the philosophy of Karl Marx was inciting the masses to question the notion of a hereditary nobility which ruled through the grace of God, the Kremlin's determination to inject thousands of dispossessed rabble-rousers into the Pale's already combustible mix was precisely the wrong approach. If Saint Petersburg was trying to upset the natural order of things, they were doing a perfect job.

Von Wahl was convinced that most Christian citizens of the Pale saw things correctly. His friends in the Okhrana, the Czar's secret police, certainly did. Alas, Saint Petersburg had turned a deaf ear to his pleas to take decisive action against illegal political parties – meaning all political parties – before it was too late. What the pusillanimous bureaucrats failed to realize was that letting radicals organize and stir the masses with dangerous notions posed a threat that went far beyond the borders of Vilna province. In the days of Peter and Catherine such things wouldn't have been tolerated. Not for a minute!

And if this wasn't problem enough, here was a letter bearing the personal seal of Count Vasily Feodorovich Rogozin, a nobleman whose influence, it was said, extended deep into the Imperial Court :

Your Excellency!

I am delighted to endorse the appointment of Doctor George Davidovich Romm to the position of Chief Physician at the Vilna Jewish Hospital, which he has been managing on an interim basis since the retirement of its previous chief. Doctor Romm began his career in service to His Imperial Majesty upon graduation from the University of Derpt in 1884.

He was awarded the rank of Collegiate Assessor in 1891 and advanced to the rank of Collegiate Counselor earlier this year. He was most recently second in charge of the provincial hospital in Petrozavodsk. Doctor Romm's family is of a very high Jewish rank in Vilna, where they operate a prestigious publishing house that has been officially recognized by the Empire for decades. Their loyalty to His Imperial Majesty is without question...

Rogozin's attempt to advance the prospects of the son-in-law of a wealthy Muscovite Jew was no doubt selfish. Not that Von Wahl had anything against Jewish doctors. On the contrary, his personal physician was a Jewish gentleman, trained by the Germans before the unfortunate excesses of Russification stripped medical schools of their most distinguished faculty. On the other hand, considering the headaches that the nettlesome ethnic group had caused the Empire, the notion of placing one of their members in a position of authority seemed, well, ridiculous.

The Governor of Vilna Province hadn't earned his reputation by caving in to outsiders, not even well-connected ones like Rogozin. He lifted his pen.

Vasily Feodorovich!

I am writing to thank you for recommending that Doctor George Romm be permanently appointed medical director at the Vilna Jewish Hospital. After giving the matter careful thought, I decided that for reasons of State security it would be unwise to proceed as you suggest. As you are undoubtedly aware, the Jewish population of Vilna has been infiltrated by political extremists who are trying to stir up a revolution. Being chief physician calls for independent judgment, which can only be exercised if the incumbent

is insulated from such pressures. Elevating a Jewish person to manage the hospital could place them in an untenable position. To avoid needless conflict, keep managers and staff from becoming unduly distracted, and insure that the facility continues to provide the best possible care, I feel it more appropriate to place an experienced Christian doctor in charge of the hospital. I've decided on Doctor Morachevsky. He is an experienced Catholic physician who runs a successful medical practice and holds acceptable political views. I am certain that when you evaluate this decision you will find it to your satisfaction.

Von Wahl handed the draft to his aide. Knowing where blame would fall should things go wrong, the wily bureaucrat read it carefully.

"It may not be enough, Your Excellency," the aide frowned. "Rogozin probably has a lot riding on this. If you don't go along he might complain to one of his buddies in the Imperial Court."

Von Wahl sighed. That bothered him, too. "What do you suggest?"

"You might add a sentence, say, to the effect that others of Romm's kind agree that bringing in a Christian doctor is preferable. That would give us cover. Jewish merchants are always asking me to expedite permits and such. I could write up a petition supporting Morachevsky and have them sign it. We'd keep it in case one of Rogozin's toadies in the capital squawks."

Von Wahl beamed. His aide was truly an expert in the ways of the bureaucracy.

"Excellent! My decision is endorsed, and by others of his own kind, no less. It's like nailing two pheasant with a single shot, eh?"

Vilna, 1905

It was less than a week since a dynamite package had landed in the lap of Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, vaporizing the Royalist hardliner who once served as Moscow's Governor-General. Given the explosion's tremendous force the revolutionary who tossed the lethal bundle should have suffered a like fate. But Ivan Kaliayev somehow survived. Officials now had to worry about a trial. Not over its outcome, which was for all purposes preordained, but because the proceedings would give socialist lawyers yet another opportunity to challenge the authority of a regime already weakened by food shortages, strikes and protest marches. And that wasn't half of it. Only a few months had passed since a disastrously failed war with Japan had left tens of thousands of peasant conscripts rotting on the plains of Manchuria and in the depths of the Tsushima Straits, irreparably rendering the bond between the Czar and his most devout subjects. Although the Empire would plod on for a bit more than another decade, there was good reason why 1905 would be remembered as the year of the first Russian revolution.

For Inspector Nikolay Ivanovich, the Okhrana's newly-appointed chief in Vilna, the only good news was that the "combat brigade" of the Party of Socialist Revolutionaries hadn't struck in the provinces but in Moscow, indeed, on a roadway inside the walls of the Kremlin. It was an audacious maneuver. When the Grand Duchess went on hands and knees to gather what few bits and pieces of her husband remained, she unavoidably conveyed the radicals' demoralizing message: no place was safe for the royals, not even within their supposedly well-guarded lair.

To gain the fullest benefit from the foul deed and Kaliayev's certain hanging, his colleagues set on a campaign to extol the assassination and glorify the killer, timing it to coincide

with the trial. Socialist Revolutionary cells throughout Russia got to work preparing propaganda for the big event.

Nikolay was poring over the files on Vilna's radical cliques when a young agent walked in.

There was no chair. Kolya's former boss had taught well.

"Inspector, we may know where they're printing their leaflets," the officer said.

"Who's 'they'?"

"S.R.'s, Inspector," the aide replied, using the initials of the radical group. "A couple of boys at one of the Jewish schools are going to sneak in this weekend while their father's at work. They 'rented' the key for the print shop from a student who works there, and not for the first time, either. His father – he's my sister's husband – saw the money and wanted to know where the boy got it."

Kolya grew impatient. "You already said it was two Jewish kids."

"Yes, Inspector, but not just any Jewish kids. They're the sons of a physician at the Jewish hospital."

"You mean Doctor Romm?"

While his agent went to get everything they had on the physician, Kolya thought back to that Sunday morning, nearly two decades earlier, when he and his colleagues in Saint Petersburg arrested the *Narodniks* who were lying in wait for Alexander III, undoubtedly keeping the Czar from coming to the same violent end as his predecessor. Meanwhile their wily boss, Inspector Bazarov, had another squad watch the informer's father. They followed him to the home of Doctor George Romm, then trailed both men to the residence of a top aide to the Governor-General. Sure enough, early the next morning an order came to let their stoolie go. It's what they

had intended all along. Efim was a thoroughly compromised soul. He would become one of the best snitches they ever had.

“Everything” on Romm turned out to be a single, lamentably thin file. It was an old background investigation, from the days when Romm wanted to be chief physician at the Jewish hospital.

“Romm has three sons, Inspector,” the agent said. “Evsey, the oldest, is fifteen. Alexander is thirteen. There’s also Vladimir, who was born here. He’s eight.”

Kolya set the folder aside. “The men are exhausted from all the running around. I’m not keen on having them spend a weekend watching boys printing copies of their new comic book.”

“Of course, their intentions aren’t for certain,” the agent conceded. “But my nephew said that their use of the print shop always coincides with a trial. And look at this.” The agent handed Kolya a crudely-printed propaganda flyer. It featured the photo of a grinning radical with a noose around his neck.

“We printed samples from all the school presses. Here’s one from the Jewish school.”

Kolya compared the imperfections in the type. They matched perfectly. “Do you think Romm knows what his boys are up to?”

“I’d like to say ‘yes,’ Inspector, but we’re not sure. He works long hours, and usually every weekend. With his wife gone, it’s not hard to explain why his boys would fall into mischief.”

“She died?”

“No, she went back to Saint Petersburg. My brother-in-law said that they separated a couple of years ago, when it was clear that Romm wouldn’t be promoted or transferred to the

capital. He's keeping company with a nurse from Petrozavodsk, but there's been no divorce yet, so it's supposed to be a secret."

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Evsey pointed to a faded photograph. "That's Von Phleve. They got him last July."

Vladimir looked carefully. "Why was he killed?"

"Because he was the Interior Minister, in charge of the police. Von Phleve was responsible for all the hangings, so it was time that he got a taste of his own medicine."

Vladimir was happy that his brothers were finally explaining. When their father was at work they often disappeared for hours, but it wasn't until this day that he learned why. He eagerly thumbed through the pages of their very secret scrapbook.

"Phleve's mistake," Evsey explained, was that he kept to a daily routine, leaving to meet with the Czar at about the same time, and taking the same route to and from. So the combat troops stationed themselves at certain points along the way. Each had a bomb." Evsey turned the page. Vladimir stared at the photo of a young man. It was remarkable only for the impassivity of his expression.

"This, Volya," Evsey said, addressing the boy by his pet name, "is the face of someone who's decided to sacrifice themselves to the cause. Yegor Sazonov was only in his twenties when he hurled the bomb. They put him in a hospital. Then when he recovered he was hung."

"Every time we kill one of them, they kill one of us," Vladimir said, his brow wrinkling. "Sometimes more."

"It doesn't make sense, not if you're counting," Alexander replied. "But this isn't a game. It's not about keeping score, it's about terror, about making your enemy's life unpredictable. That's what will bring down the czar. If it's necessary to give one's life..."

Vladimir's eyes welled with tears. "But, you're my family..."

Evsey and Alexander enveloped their little brother in a hug. "We told you that we're not in the combat organization," Evsey said. "You have to be older." He handed Vladimir a handkerchief. "We contribute by printing flyers. That's all."

Vladimir blew his nose. "I want to do something, too!"

Alexander frowned. "That, Volya, is impossible. If we get caught in the school..."

"But it's not fair!" Vladimir insisted. "Look, you have to take them somewhere, right? I could be a...messenger!"

Evsey and Alexander traded a glance. Their precocious sibling had a point. They were getting to be well known, and suspicious policemen had asked to look in their rucksacks more than once. No one would pay attention to an eight year old. No, it was much too risky. What if their father found out? Still...

The story continues in "Stalin's Witnesses." Based on true events, it tracks the fascinating life of Vladimir Romm, a Soviet spy and foreign correspondent, from his days in Vilna, through his assignments in Japan, Germany, France, the League of Nations and the U.S., and finally, to his forced appearance as a "witness" at the most notorious set of show trials in modern history.

The Romm Printing House of Vilna (now Vilnius, Lithuania) was a celebrated publisher of Jewish religious texts in nineteenth century Eastern Europe. George Romm, the son of the printing house owner, became a well-known physician. He and his sons Evsey, Alexander and Vladimir became active in the anti-Czarist resistance.

Von Wahl's letter is a paraphrased and expanded version of the actual document.

George Romm attended medical school in Derpt. His professor and the roommate Efim are fictional characters.

Empress Petrovna's quote is from Simon Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Russia and Poland*

Sofia Evseena, a Saint Petersburg pianist and daughter of a wealthy Moscow merchant, was George Romm's first wife. Their relationship is believed to be much as described.

Inspector Bazarov and his agents are fictional. But the named assassins, the political/terrorist organizations for which they carried out their grisly deeds and the events in which they participated are real.

As far as is known, no member of the Romm family took part in any killings. However, George Romm eventually served a term of imprisonment for his involvement with the anti-Czarist Bund. He later emigrated with his second wife, a nurse, to Europe.