

The Beast in the Red Forest

Inspector Pekkala

Book 5

Sam Eastland

Postmark: Elizabeth, New Jersey. March 4th, 1936.

Addressed to:

The United Brotherhood of Steelworkers, Branch II,
Jackson St.,
Newark, New Jersey, USA

Return Address-

None

Boys, I am leaving today!

My bags are packed and I'm bound for a new life in Russia. I have a guarantee of work, housing and school for my two kids as soon as I walk off the boat. They are practically begging for skilled craftsmen over there, while here in America there are over 13 million unemployed. As you know, there are members of our New York City Chapter currently living with their families in abandoned buildings down on Wall Street. We are fighting each other for hand outs at the bread lines. Last month, I sold, for the price of one dollar, all the medals I won fighting in the Argonne Forest back in the Great War.

Come to Russia, boys. That's where the future is. I realize that leaving home is hard, and starting a new life is even harder, but I know you are as tired as I am of being chewed up and spat out and begging for what we know is ours by right. Aren't you tired of staying up late nights and worrying if you will make the rent this month, or else be thrown out into the street?

The Soviet Trade Agency has an office in Manhattan. Each step of the way, they help those who are searching for a new beginning. Thousands of Americans are arriving in Russia every day and they are being welcomed with open arms. They don't care if you are black or white, as long as you're ready to work. Moscow has its own English-language schools, an English language newspaper, and even has a baseball team!

I hope I will see you all again soon in the great new country Mr. Joseph Stalin is building, with the help of men and women just like you and me.

Yours Sincerely,
William B. Vasko

Western Ukraine. **February 1944**

Captain Gregor Hudzik remarked to himself, as his shovel chipped through the frozen ground, how many of the skeletons still had rosary beads entwined about their wrists.

South of the town Tsuman, in western Ukraine, on a dirt road between the villages of Olyka and Dolgoshei, lay the ruins of a place called Misovichi. Its population had never been more than a few hundred. They were farmers, tanners of leather and brewers of rough alcohol, known as 'Samahonka', which had achieved some notoriety in the region. Their unremarkable but steady way of life changed forever when, in late 1918, a soldier named Kolya Yankevitch, returned to Misovichi after serving in the Army of the Tsar. Soon after reaching home, Yankevitch fell ill with the Spanish Influenza virus which, in the years immediately following the conflict, killed more people than the Great War itself had done. The virus spread through the town. Few were spared. The dead were buried in the woods, in mass graves dug by men and women who were themselves soon laid to rest in those same pits.

By the time the Spanish Influenza epidemic had run its course, disappearing as suddenly as it had arrived, there was no one left in the village of Misovichi.

Fearing that the disease might still be lurking in the beds of those who had perished, in their faded portraits on the walls and in the drawers of

battered cutlery, the houses and their contents were left to rot. Whole shelves of books, their pages bloated with the damp and covers powdered green with mildew, remained abandoned. Floorboards buckled. Ceilings sagged and then collapsed, spilling beehives choked with honey and wooden chests containing baptismal cups, confirmation documents and wedding dresses into the rooms below. The streets and alleyways of Misovichi became rivers of wildflowers.

No one spoke of the town anymore, as if the place had been washed from the memories of everyone who lived in the nearby villages of Borbin, Milostov and Klevan.

Almost everyone.

A local man named Gregor Hudzik had been thinking about the people of Misovichi, and the mass grave in the forest where they had all been laid to rest.

Hudzik was a farrier by trade. At one time, his business had made him one of the wealthier men in Borbin. He had traveled from town to town, as far away as Rovno and Lutsk, with an anvil, bellows, tongs and hammers on his cart. But there was more to being a farrier than simply shoeing horses all day long. He had to be a listener as well. People talk to a man who only comes by once a month in ways they never would if they saw him every day. Patiently, he listened to their fears and hopes and disappointments. Lovers and mistresses. Lies and betrayals. No detail was ever too small that someone did not choose to let him know. In silence, Hudzik endured their stories of self-pitying vanity, which was how he came to know that a good portion of the wealth of Misovichi lay glimmering in the jaws of its inhabitants.

By the time the war broke out in '39, Hudzik had been shoeing horses for over twenty years. At first, he imagined that his work prospects might even improve, but by the summer of 1941, he was stopped by a column of Red Army soldiers as they retreated from the invading German Army. They moved a rabble of barely functioning trucks, spent horses towing overloaded wagons and men shambling along barefoot, their poorly-made boots having long ago fallen apart.

They promptly confiscated his wagon, his horses and all of his supplies. They even took his shoes away from him.

When Hudzik, sobbing with impotent rage, asked what he should do now with his life, the leader of the column offered to bring him along. Or else, he was told, he could take his chances with the German Army, who were, by then, only a few kilometers down the road.

Realizing the true nature of his predicament, Hudzik agreed. He was given back his boots, his horse and his cart, now loaded down with wounded soldiers, and he joined the retreating Red Army.

Arriving in Kiev one week later, Hudzik was formally enlisted as a farrier in the Red Army. He was given a uniform and the rank of sergeant.

At first, it had all seemed like a cruel joke to Hudzik but, in time, he came to understand that this twist of fate had probably saved his life.

Both of his horses died in the winter of 1941. The first stepped on a Russian landmine when it slipped its tether one night and wandered out into a field. The second froze to death in the town of Pozhaists and was immediately hacked to pieces for food. The cart wore out in the spring of 1942. With iron-rimmed wheels yawning on their axles, it finally collapsed beneath the weight of a thousand horse shoes which Hudzik was transporting from a foundry to a supply depot.

As he stared at the ruin of his cart, and the tangled heap of horseshoes strewn across the road, it seemed to Hudzik that the last link to his home had finally been severed.

Taking it as a sign that he would never get back there alive, Hudzik sat down by the side of the road, put his head in his hands and wept.

This event was witnessed by a famous journalist, Vasily Semyonovich Grossman, who wrote a story about it for the Red Army newspaper, Krasnaya Zvezda. In the article, Grossman transformed the shambles of Hudzik's wagon wreck into a symbol of the Red Army's heroic struggle. They even took Hudzik's picture, which showed a man whom he barely recognized as himself; a luckless creature formed of mud and soot, with matted hair and staring eyes and the paths of tears like war paint daubed across his cheeks.

If it hadn't been for that photograph, Hudzik's grim prediction might well have come true. But in the halls of the Kremlin, his battle-weary face did not go unnoticed.

Soon afterwards, Hudzik received a medal, promotion to the rank of captain and orders of transfer to the Headquarters staff. From then on, he was no longer a driver of carts and a shoer of horses in the front line. That job passed to other men, who went on to die in great numbers, their mildewed bones lying jumbled with those of the horses who perished alongside them, unburied on the Russian steppe.

In 1943, when Russia went on the offensive, Hudzik found himself heading in the direction of his home in western Ukraine. Soon he even began to recognize places and names on the map. The closer he came to Rovno, the more he began to think about what would become of him when the war ended. His horses, his wagon and his tools were all gone now,

scattered across the length of Russia. Hudzik knew he would have to begin again, but to start from scratch required capital, and how on earth was he to come by wealth like that?

That was when Hudzik realized that it was time to pay a visit to the graves of Misovichi.

On a cold, clear February morning, Hudzik's column halted twenty kilometers east of Rovno, only an hour's walk from Misovichi.

Knowing that it would be several hours before his absence was noticed, Hudzik slipped away, carrying his rifle and a shovel.

The mass grave was not difficult to find. It stood nestled in a grove of willow trees, only a stone's throw from the road.

After locating the site, Hudzik propped the gun against a tree, hung his coat upon a broken branch, took up the shovel and began to dig. Under the snow was a layer of hard frozen ground about a hand's length deep. He almost broke his shovel blade getting through it, but beneath that layer of ice-clogged dirt the ground was only crystallized with frost and cleaved away with much less effort.

The bodies lay close to the surface. No coffins had been used. Some of the skeletons wore clothing, but most were only wrapped in bed sheets. The dead had been stacked so deeply that even when the hole Hudzik had dug came up to his chest, there still seemed to be more layers below.

His first hour's digging earned him more than twenty golden teeth, which he wiggled loose from the jaws and placed in a small leather bag around his neck normally reserved for loose tobacco. Hudzik marveled at how much precious metal had been hammered into the mouths of those same people whose claims of poverty, when it came time to pay their bills, he had silently learned to despise.

As he stared into the dirt-filled eye sockets, twisting them from side to side as he searched for the glint of metal, the faces of those men and women he had known in Misovichi passed before his eyes with the flickering uncertainty of an old film tripping off its spool.

Steam rose from the sweat on Hudzik's back as he cast aside ribs and shoulder blades and pelvises still scabbed with cartilage. The musty smell of the bones hung in the air around him

Once, he stopped his digging and listened, in case anyone might be coming. But there was only the harmless droning of a plane high above the clouds. Hudzik had spent most of his whole life in these forests and he had always been able to sense, more than hear, when something wasn't right. Nobody could catch him by surprise. Not in this place. His senses were tuned to levels of awareness which he couldn't even name.

Hudzik went back to work, widening the hole in which he stood. All around him, the white sticks of bones jutted from the dirt and he chipped them away with the blade of his shovel.

Suddenly he stopped and raised his head.

Somebody was out there.

Cautiously, Hudzik set aside his shovel and glanced towards his rifle, still leaning against a tree at the edge of the grave site. He looked around, but saw no one. Neither could he hear anything out of the ordinary; just the wind in the tops of the trees and the breath rustling from his lungs. Just when Hudzik had almost convinced himself that his mind was playing tricks on him, he saw a figure coming down the middle of the road from the direction of Misovichi.

Hudzik was baffled. No one lived in Misovichi. No one even used this road anymore. It crossed his mind that maybe he was looking at a ghost.

The stranger was a civilian, a short-brimmed soft cap tilted back on his head, revealing a clean-shaven face. He was dressed in a short brown canvas coat with two large patch pockets at the hip and a double row of buttons down the chest. The coat was undone and, underneath, he wore a leather belt and a holster. Slung over one shoulder was a canvas bag with leather straps whose contents, judging from the way the man carried it, appeared to be quite heavy.

Although the man was clearly young, all youth had been purged from his eyes, replaced by a long-staring blankness in which Hudzik recognized the lurking nightmares of all that this man had endured.

Probably a partisan, thought Hudzik. There were many of them in these parts and it wasn't always easy to tell which side they were fighting for.

Hudzik ducked down, anticipating that this man must be at the lead of a patrol. To his surprise, however, nobody else appeared. The man was entirely on his own and seemingly oblivious to everything around him.

What is he doing here, wondered Hudzik. People from the forest never walk in the middle of the road like that, as if afraid of the wilderness which surrounds them. They keep to the shadows at the side, knowing that the wilderness protects them. How can a man so alone be so confident? It made him nervous that he couldn't find the answer.

Standing absolutely still as the man walked by no more than twenty paces away, Hudzik felt a surge of confidence that he might indeed go unnoticed.

Then, just as the stranger drew level with Hudzik, he suddenly stopped and turned.

In that moment, Hudzik realized that the man had known about him all along. Standing up to his chest in the hole, with skulls and rib bones and the crooked dice of vertebrae strewn all around him, Hudzik knew that there could be no words to talk his way out of the trap he had made for himself. The blood seemed to drain from his heart. Once more, he glanced at the rifle, leaning against the tree.

The stranger followed his gaze.

Hudzik waited, knowing that he would never get to his weapon before the man drew his gun. All he could do was wait there helplessly, while the man decided what to do.

Slowly, without a word, the stranger turned away and continued on down the road. He soon passed out of sight.

Only when the sound of footsteps had faded from his ears did Hudzik begin to feel safe again. His shoulders slumped as he breathed out, leaning heavily upon his shovel, as if the strength had been sapped from his veins. Hudzik wondered if he should go back. Will this be enough, he asked himself, as he clenched the leather bag around his neck? Maybe just a little while longer. A little more gold. What good is it doing them now? And then I will leave them in peace and never come back. Never. Almost certainly never.

Hudzik returned to his digging and was pleased to find that the next skull he turfed up had been fitted with two golden teeth. With a grunt of satisfaction he twisted them out, the sound like a stalk of celery being snapped in half, and slipped them into the leather bag.

It was then that he heard, directly behind him, the faint rustle of somebody drawing in breath. Terrified, he froze. "Who's there?" he whispered, too afraid to look.

There was no reply, but Hudzik could still hear the breathing.

Slowly Hudzik turned, shielding his face with the blade of the shovel, and found himself looking at the stranger.

The man stood at the edge of the hole, a pistol in his hand, its barrel pointed squarely at Hudzik's face.

"You are just the right size," said the stranger.

"What?" asked Hudzik, peering from behind the shovel blade.

With a dull clang, a bullet punctured the rusty metal, passed through Hudzik's right eye and smashed through the back of his head.

For a moment, the man stared at Hudzik, lying at the bottom of the hole. Then he hauled out the body, stripped off Hudzik's uniform and put it on himself. He rolled the paunchy white corpse back into the hole, tossed in the rifle, his own clothes and the shovel, before kicking the dirt back into the hole until no trace of the farrier remained.

Carefully, he brushed the dirt from his sleeves, retraced his footsteps out of the graveyard and kept on walking down the middle of the road.