

CHECHNYA DIARY

A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S STORY OF SURVIVING THE WAR IN CHECHNYA

THOMAS GOLTZ

AUTHOR OF *AZERBAIJAN DIARY*

CHECHNYA DIARY

THOMAS GOLTZ

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

CHECHNYA DIARY

THOMAS GOLTZ

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

ISBN 0-312-26874-2 $27.95 / $41.95 Can.

Chechnya Diary is a story about "the story" of the war in Chechnya, the "rogue republic" that attempted to secede from the Russian Federation at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Specifically, it is the story of the Samashki Massacre, a symbol of the Russian brutality that was employed to crush Chechen resistance.

Thomas Goltz is a member of what *Brill's Content* called "the exclusive journalistic cadre of compulsive, danger-addicted voyeurs who court death to get the story." But in addition to providing a tour through the convoluted Soviet and then post-Soviet nationalities policy that led to the bloodbath in Chechnya, *Chechnya Diary* is part of a larger exploration of the role (and impact) of the media in conflict areas. And at its heart, *Chechnya Diary* is the story of Hussein, the leader of the local resistance in the small town that bears the brunt of the massacre as it is drawn into war.

This is a deeply personal book, a first-person narrative that reads like an adventure but addresses larger theoretical issues ranging from the history of ethnic peoples and nationalities in the USSR and the Russian Federation to journalistic responsibility in crisis zones. *Chechnya Diary* is a crossover work that offers both the historical context and a ground-level view of a complex and brutal war.

CHECHNYA DIARY

ALSO BY THOMAS GOLTZ

Azerbaijan Diary

THOMAS GOLTZ

CHECHNYA DIARY

A WAR CORRESPONDENT'S STORY OF SURVIVING THE WAR IN CHECHNYA

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS / ST. MARTIN'S PRESS NEW YORK

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS.
An imprint of St. Martin's Press.

CHECHNYA DIARY. Copyright © 2003 by Thomas Goltz. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. For information, address St. Martin's Press, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10010.

www.stmartins.com

Book design by Jonathan Bennett

Map © 2003 Mark Stein Studios

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Goltz, Thomas.
Chechnya diary : a war correspondent's story of surviving the war in Chechnya / Thomas Goltz.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-312-26874-2
1. Goltz, Thomas. 2. Chechnëì (Russia)—History—Civil War, 1994—Personal narratives, American. 3. War correspondents—United States—Biography I. Title.

DK511.C37G65 2003
947.5'2—dc21

2003054967

First Edition: October 2003

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Hussein and his family



Photo by Anonymous

contents

Acknowledgments IX

Map: Samashki XV

PART ONE

Prologue: War Correspondent on a Roof 3

1. The Golden Bridge 13

2. A Rogue Republic Recalled 29

3. Masterpiece of Confusion 63

4. Samashki: The Place of Deer 74

PART TWO

5. Beleaguered Guest 83

6. Contact 94

7. Dog of War 104

8. Hunter and Hunted 117

9. Siege and Survival 126

10. Marching Mothers, Monks—and Mikich 135

PART THREE

11. Getting Out the News Blues 147

12. *Massivni Ubitzva v Samashk* (Mass Killing in Samashki) 153

13. Witness 180

14. *Gdeje Front?* (Where's the Front?) 188

PART FOUR

15. The Consolation Prize is Life 209

16. Den of Iniquity 221

17. The Law of the Mountains 235

18. A Town Called Hope 247

19. Expert Purveyor of Pain 262

20. Cold Feet and a Burning Brain 272

Epilogue: Stumbling Toward Samashki 279

acknowledgments

There are many people involved in the creation of this book, some whose family names I never knew, remember imperfectly, or chose not to reveal.

At the top of the list is Hussein and his extended family, who invited me into their lives during a period of extreme confusion and duress. I doubt any will ever see this work, but for the record: *barkal* to Ussam, Shirvani, Xamid, Scylah, Sultan, Rana, as well as Isa, Musa, Muhammad, Commander Ali and his sons Osman and Omar, Akhmad Amaev, and all other friends, alive or dead, from the small town of Samashki.

Although most of my work was performed solo, at times I was often dependent on the generosity of friends and colleagues for transportation, telephone, and even toothpaste. Special thanks are thus due the extraordinary Lawrence Sheets, Elif Kaban, Robert Finn, Andrew Harding, Alexis Rowell, Colin Peck and Sonia Mikich, Stanley Greene, Natalie Nougayrede, Rachel Danbar, Peter Burckhardt, Vanora Bennett, Steve Coppen of ABC TV/Moscow, and, hugely, Danny Schechter of PBS/Global Vision. Other angels in the media include Mark Foley, Bill Holstein, Kevin Buckley, the BBC's Keith Bowers, and Nik Gowing. Hand-holders range from Margot Kidder, Bill Campbell and Teddy Yates in Montana and, particularly, Jeannie Matthews in London. Readers and critics of the draft manuscript include Charles Frissell, Uta Gaedeke, Bob Mason, Judy Muncy, Gengiz Hancer and, especially, Doctor Ewen Patterson. Thanks to each and every one.

Those who have written books on Chechnya represent a small circle of friends and colleagues whose devotion to the tragic subject does

not allow for rivalry. I cite only a few here. Tom de Waal and Carlotta Gall's *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War* (U.K. 1997, U.S.A. 1998) was the first contemporary history about the war in Chechnya written by western journalists and it remains a milestone accomplishment of analysis and powerful writing. Anatol Lieven's *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (1998) is arguably the most comprehensive analytical work to appear to date, and is essential reading. Sebastian Smith's *Allah's Mountains* (1998) and Chris Bird's *To Catch a Tatar* (2002) are well-written accounts of their experiences in the Caucasus with a focus on the first round of war of 1994–96. The category of woman-goes-to-war is covered by the Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya in her *A Dirty War* (2001) and the French reporter Anne Nivat in her *Chienne du Guerre* (2001), both of which are gritty journalistic accounts of the renewed violence of 1999. Vanora Bennett's *Cry Wolf!* (1998) is more a rhapsody of discovery of the Chechens, while Scott Anderson's *The Man Who Tried to Save the World* (1999) is a fascinating study of the life and times of the American aid worker Fred Cuny, who disappeared in Chechnya, even though most of his life (and thus the focus of the book) was spent elsewhere. Yo'av Karny's *The Highlanders* (2000) contains important material on the Chechen diaspora community in the Middle East.

Academic institutions or individuals who have influenced my thinking (or indirectly supported me by means of invitations to speak) include Ned Walker of Berkeley, Stephen Jones of Mount Holyoke, Fred Starr and Charles Fairbanks of Johns Hopkins in D.C., as well as Ken Jensen, executive director of the American Committee on Foreign Relations, who sent me spinning through the American heartland to tell the good folks of Casper, Billings, Boise, Little Rock, Louisville, Tampa, Salt Lake, Rochester (and elsewhere) of the dynamic at play in Chechnya and the Caucasus. Paul Henze shared many published and unpublished manuscripts on the Caucasus with me, and directed me to such luminaries as the Benningsons and Moshe Gammon. I also owe a great debt to Valeri Tishkov for his significant contribution to the study of ethnic insanity in the former USSR, best summed up by the subtitle of his classic *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and*

After the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame (1997) as well as to Terry Martin, whose *The Affirmative Action Empire* (2001) should soon be declared to be the academic benchmark on the formative process of Soviet nationalities policy. Other useful works that I should mention include Ben Fowkes's *Russia and Chechnya: The Permanent Crisis* (2000), Robert Seely's *Russo–Chechen Conflict 1800–2000* (2001), as well as diverse articles and books by the remarkable Ron Suny, whose bibliography of work on the Caucasus might fill up a volume by itself.

Then there is Georgii Derlugian, professor of sociology at Northwestern University, to whom I wish to give special thanks not only for sharing his insights, but for squeezing me out of the realm of romancing the Chechens as noble warriors and to see their particular tragedy as part of a larger sociological context of state building and (self-) destruction. The essence of his argument, set forth in a series of deliciously complex articles in publications such as the *New Left Review,* and soon to appear in book form, is that the Chechen bid for independence was doomed to failure from the start *because* of the collapse of the USSR, and the fact that rebellious Chechnya lacked a client relationship with an outside power that would have elevated the Chechen-Russian confrontation to that of a battle of proxies in the larger Cold War. Instead, the brutalized and betrayed Chechens are now in the process of reverting from being a national community to being a religious group—and one more inspired by the Wahhabite school of Islam, practiced by Osama bin Laden, than the nationalist aspirations of Chechen President Djohar Dudayev a decade before.

The above reference to the late president of Chechnya is a good point of departure to lay out a few notes on transliterations of proper names from Russian and Chechen. In the literature, the reader encounters everything from Dzhokhar to Djohar to Jokhar and even Johar. I have opted for the most common of the variations, Djohar, because it is closest to the sound of the name when spoken in English. Other common Muslim names, such as Ibrahim and Muhammad, have been rendered as pronounced in Chechen (or Turkish or Arabic) and *not* how

such names are transliterated in English from Russian, which lacks a soft *h* and replaces that consonant with a *g*—e.g., Ibragim and Mugammad/Mogammad—rather like transliterating "Henry" to "Genry."

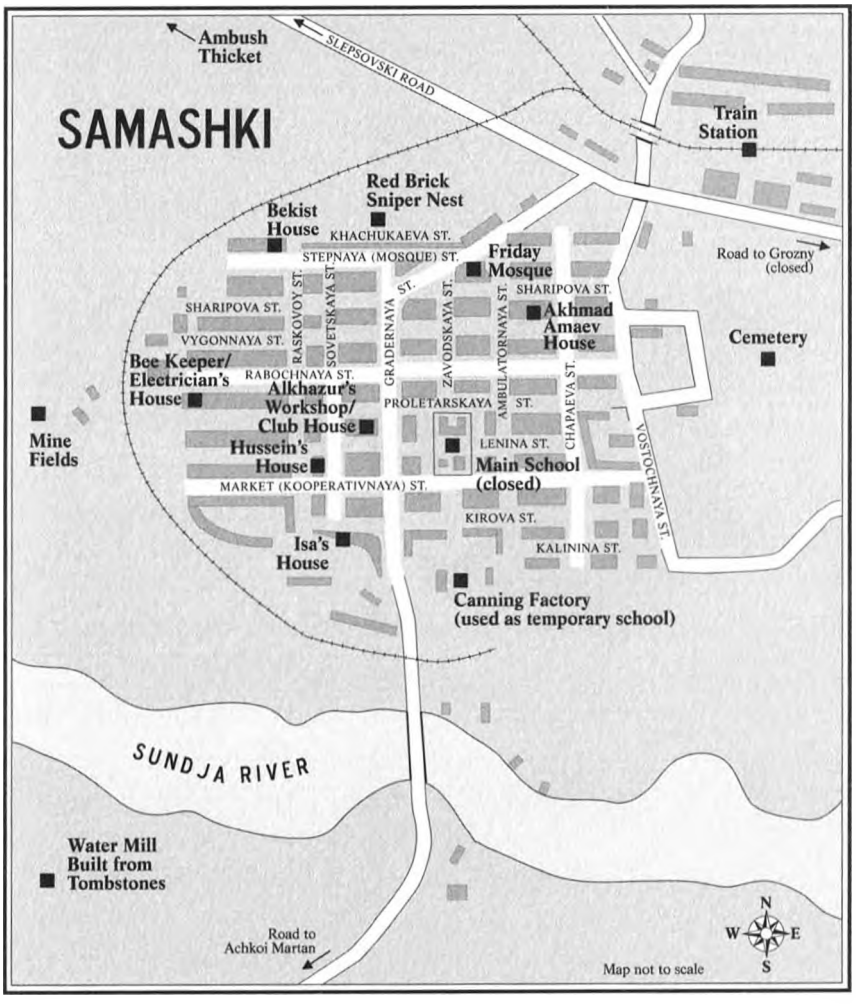
Finally, I would like to thank both my literary agent, Diana Finch, and editor and publisher, Peter Wolverton, for their extreme patience with me in finishing this book. By my estimation, I was embarrassingly close to being exactly seven hundred days overdue in submitting the manuscript in its final form.

The reasons for that, I hope, will become clear to anyone who reads the following pages. Writing the story of Samashki and Hussein has been a very painful process.

I fervently hope that it has been worth it for all concerned.

The observer affects the observed.

– ESSENCE OF THE HEISENBERG UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE


Ambush Thicket
SLEPSOVSKI ROAD
SAMASHKI
Train Station
Red Brick Sniper Nest
Bekist House
KHACHUKAEVA ST.
STEPNAYA (MOSQUE) ST.
Friday Mosque
Road to Grozny (closed)
SHARIPOVA ST.
RASKOVOY ST.
SOVETSKAYA ST.
GRADERNAYA ST.
ZAVODSKAYA ST.
AMBULATORNAYA ST.
SHARIPOVA ST.
Akhmad Amaev House
VYGONNAYA ST.
Cemetery
Bee Keeper/ Electrician's House
RABOCHNAYA ST.
Alkhazur's Workshop/ Club House
PROLETARSKAYA ST.
CHAPAEVA ST.
Mine Fields
Hussein's House
LENINA ST.
Main School (closed)
VOSTOCHNAYA ST.
MARKET (KOOPERATIVNAYA) ST.
KIROVA ST.
Isa's House
KALININA ST.
Canning Factory (used as temporary school)
SUNDJA RIVER
Water Mill Built from Tombstones
Road to Achkoi Martan
N
W
E
S
Map not to scale

PART ONE



prologue

WAR CORRESPONDENT ON A ROOF

It was while standing atop a two-story apartment block in a muddy little town in western Chechnya, waiting for an aerial assault to turn the mud into clay and the town into dust, that I started to reflect on the nature of my career, namely that of being a packager and purveyor of brutality between strange people in strange places, hopefully for the edification of television and reading audiences back home.

I was a war correspondent, and one, theoretically, in extreme danger. Aside from the minaret of the main mosque in town, the building I was standing on was the highest structure around. As such, it was an obvious target for the air attack expected to pummel the town that night. Because I was carrying a camera on a tripod with a shotgun microphone planted on top—a rig that many say greatly resembles a recoilless rifle with telescopic sight—the potential for pilots and gunners mistaking me for a gunman was high. I would have shot at me, too, had I been a nervous Russian airman.

Four journalists had already been killed in Chechnya before my arrival in country. Three more were announced as missing and presumed dead during my stay. Two were from a St. Petersburg newspaper; I was the third. Over the course of the next two years of war, followed by two years of not-war-not-peace between Russia and Chechnya and then more years of renewed war that continue unabated down to the publication of this book, even more journalists would fall—although their numbers would only be a drop in the bloody bucket of death and destruction visited upon players, both armed and unarmed, in that blighted land in the Russian North Caucasus.

Some people think that journalists involved in life-threatening work are brave. I no longer think so. If I ever get killed covering killing, I would like to state right now that the only person more foolish than me for getting into such a situation would be anyone who would describe my having done so as courageous. No, if I ever get killed covering killing, let my epitaph read something like *He squandered the gift of life by trying to get too close to death.*

As a print journalist I have lived dangerously—and foolishly—just to get "the story," even when I knew said story would never see the light of day. The most ridiculous example of this tacit death urge was my hanging around the besieged city Sukhumi, in western Georgia, in 1993 with Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, long after it had become impossible to file reports on the collapsing situation. The reason for my silence was due to a lack of electricity and a functioning phone line. The media era of E-mail, the Internet, cell phones, and then, finally, direct video uplinks had not yet arrived.

Still, writer-recorders of war have it easy, relatively speaking. You don't have to see the shell hit the building to know that it connected; you can wait in the basement until the screaming has stopped. There you can huddle up with people who have been living like rats for weeks, and describe in great detail the odor of old urine and sweat and fear. You do not ask your subjects to step outside where the light is better for an interview about how they feel about it all.

That is what television journalists do—and for the obvious reason that the image is all. You have to try and get as close as possible to the people shooting and the people getting shot, and make sure the lighting is right. And more. As a combat cameraman, you actually anticipate fighting and are often almost disappointed if it does not happen. What few admit but secretly hope for is that someone will actually die in front of your lens, because it makes such compelling material.

And that was exactly where I was that cold and frightening night, standing on a roof in an obscure little town in western Chechnya, risking my life in order to further my career by capturing an adequate

measure of the death and destruction that was to be visited upon the very people I had been living with for several weeks, all for "the story."

The place was called Samashki. In the Chechen language the name means "the place of deer." It was destined to become the most resonant symbol of Russian brutality during the course of what most outsiders call the "first" Russo–Chechen War, when rampaging Russian forces slaughtered some two hundred men, women, and children in the town. Samashki maintained that status for almost five years, until its status as a font of sorrow was usurped by the nearby town of Alkhan Yurt, when the latter was subjected to an even more brutal wave of wanton killing during the "second" Russo–Chechen war.

Actually, most Chechens do not make any distinction between "first" and "second" wars. They tend to regard the entire period from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 down to today as being a long continuum of cold, cool, warm, and hot conflict with Russia, often expressed as merely the most recent attempt by Russians, repeated approximately every 50 years, to eradicate the Chechens from the face of the earth.

Genocide, in a word.

I am not sure if I agree with that formulation, but it is what most Chechens believe. And given their communal experience over the past ten years, with over 100,000 civilians and combatants killed and virtually all survivors forced into refugee status or reduced to a troglodyte life in the shattered ruins of their cities and towns and villages, it is difficult to blame them for believing so. Or blame them for their slow slide toward an Al Qaeda–style of Islam, with all that that implies in our post–September 11 world.

I first entered Samashki in mid-February 1995, and discovered a place so nondescript that I had initial misgivings about staying there at all. My assigned task was to make a one-man television documentary for ABC's *Nightline* on "the Chechen spirit," an on-camera exploration about what motivated the outgunned Chechens to continue resisting the might of the Russian army. Virtually all other foreign correspon-

dents in Chechnya at the time were focusing their attention on the capital city, Grozny. But here I was, some thirty miles from the action, stuck in a large village consisting of walled compounds lining wandering lanes that seemed to be inches deep in mud, even when it did not rain. I stayed because I guess I intuited that the writing was on the wall. War *would* come to Samashki, and I would be there to greet it, camera in hand.

Situated on a small salient of territory still under the control of forces loyal to Chechen President Djohar Dudayev, Samashki controlled the main railway tracks to Grozny from the North and West. As such, it was an obvious target for the Russian forces as they slowly but surely "cleansed" the denuded hills of northern Chechnya of resistance, pushing ever southward toward the mountains where Dudayev had chosen to make his last stand.

My plan was to spend a few days in town, get to know some folks, go out on a few missions, and then get out before the place was obliterated. In the best of all possible worlds, I would accomplish the getting-out part while the obliteration was taking place. In the television trade, this is called collecting "bang-bang."

But through February and then March 1995, the Russian military had been less than obliging in helping me complete the documentary as planned. True, we had taken a lot of hits around the periphery of the town, but this was mainly long-distance, nocturnal bombing and not very photographic: I got "great" sound—bombs going *va-BOOM!* and heavy machine gun fire going *BrrITT BrrrITT* in the outlying woods. But in terms of video image, there was not much to see: long minutes of jet black, all-enveloping night, occasionally interrupted by a drifting orb of distant flares or the sudden flash of a large explosion. Due to the laws of physics, these were seldom if ever in sync with the sound, and thus of no practical use, television-wise.

The daytime attacks by planes and helicopters had also been frustrating. The pilots and gunners had the habit of attacking those parts of town where I was not, or when I approached (as more reasonable people were fleeing or hiding under whatever shelter they could find), remained just out of camera range. Nor can I blame the Russians

entirely for my failure. On one occasion, with helicopters literally firing missiles over my head, I was so frightened that I turned the camera off when the choppers were in focus, and back on to shoot my feet churning through the muddy ground while looking for a place to hide. Once the choppers had the audacity to attack while my battery charger was on the fritz, forcing me to wait while the device was repaired and the batteries recharged.

On a professional level this was all very irritating. But on a personal level I was very glad, because, as the days went by and turned into weeks, the townsfolk (and fighters) who had been strangers became acquaintances and then friends and providers and protectors—they became people. And maybe I started becoming a person, rather than just another media mercenary.

My initial hosts were three brothers—Isa, Muhammad, and Musa. None were fighters per se, but men who tried to make their own contribution to the cause in their own way by buying bullets, hand grenades, and even land mines from Russian soldiers. The medium of exchange was often alcohol, and they were not above spiking vodka with bleach. This allegedly increased the thirst for even more vodka, while contributing to blindness.

Through the brothers I met many others in town, civilians and militants. In the former category were men like Vakha, a local cigarette-and-chocolate merchant who also excelled in the procurement of arms from Russian deserters; Ruslan, a high-wire walker in a Moscow circus who acted as a rooftop scout, and Musa, a tailor who had turned his garment-making skills to a rather different use: he stitched together vests from rags to hold Kalashnikov clips; they thus doubled as a bandolier and poor man's flak-jacket. Their clubhouse, as it were, was the home of the local blacksmith named Alkhazur.

At the time, these men (and boys) were labeled "separatist bandit formations" by Moscow, even though they regarded themselves as "freedom fighters," or defenders of Chechnya's independence. Today, almost seven years later, and with the concept of Osama bin Laden embedded into the fearlobe of virtually every Western brain, they would probably be called "Muslim terrorists." And given subsequent

developments in Chechnya—despair, mainly, and a profound sense of merely having been used as pawns in a much larger scenario involving a host of outside actors—it requires no great stretch of the imagination to project at least some of them into Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan prior to September 11, 2001, or even participating in the ghastly hostage crisis in Moscow in October 2002, when some 50 kamikaze Chechens, including 18 women, seized a theater packed with more than 750 show-goers. Were any of my friends from Samashki in that theater, dressed in black and espousing suicide in the name of Islam? I do not know and want to doubt it. But human beings driven to despair are ultimately capable of anything, I have learned.

At the time of our acquaintance, the Samashki garrison was staffed with volunteers from all walks of life and motivated by a single impulse: to keep the Russian Army out of their muddy little town. It had to do with potato fields and harvest, and not Islam.

The unofficial leader of the local resistance was a forty-six-year-old farmer named Hussein, a man who embodied the multiple contradictions and historical baggage of being a contemporary *Noxchi,* as the Chechens call themselves in their own, very non-Russian language, which they call *Noxchi Mot.* Hussein had been born in the distant, Soviet Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan, some three thousand miles east of his ancestral homeland in the Russian North Caucasus. The reason for this was stunningly simple, and was basic to understanding the Chechen soul. On the night of February 23, 1944, and at the height of the Soviet winter war against Hitler, Josef Stalin charged the entire population of Chechnya with collaboration with the Nazi *Wehrmacht,* and sent the Chechens into internal exile. The *Vysl,* or Deportation, was conducted by the most brutal of methods: Families were rounded up, packed on boxcars and sent east in the general direction of Central Asia and the Chinese frontier. Half died en route, and all who survived carried the soul scars that came from the near-genocide. One of Hussein's three children, a boy named Ali, had the misfortune to have been born on "The Day" and had thus never been allowed to celebrate his birthday.

Hussein was back in Kazakhstan when word came that war had

broken out in his homeland. He immediately sold all the farm machinery he had, with the exception of a truck, purchased weapons on the black market and began making his way back to Samashki. With him came his younger brother Ussam (whose wife and two young children were already there), his cousin Shirvani (a bookworm who had undergone two treatments for bone cancer acquired during his Soviet-era military service, when he and two other Chechens were obliged to load nuclear warheads—the other two men were dead); Shirvani's brother-in-law Xamid (a mean and wiry shepherd you wanted on your side and not against you); a pleasant young man of about twenty-five named Seylah, who seemed to be related to Xamid in some way, and Ali, a big jolly fellow who was always laughing and joking (and who, of course, was the first casualty). Bringing up the rear was Hussein's nephew Sultan, a doe-eyed youth who was fulfilling his father's defense duty because the latter was bedridden after having undergone a liver operation.

With me tagging along, this small group planted antitank mines in the potato fields surrounding Samashki, patrolled the roads, and blew up railway bridges to prevent the Russians from sending an armored train piled high with ammunition down the tracks to reach Grozny. Driving off the armored columns that harassed the town was another activity that required more than a little nerve: In addition to Kalashnikov rifles, Hussein's arsenal consisted of a single heavy machine gun, which he had his men lug out to various positions in a hay wagon. Because ammunition was so scarce, he would load each shell individually, and never used automatic fire. Still, by moving the gun around, he gave the impression that he had more men and equipment than he did, and once even forced a firefight between two Russian columns, each of which thought that the other was the enemy, as we hid in thorn-bush thickets between the potato fields.

Those were the days. In the evening, I did what everyone else around me did: sat around Alkhazur's living room drinking endless cups of tea and chain-smoking cigarettes before wandering back through the blackened, muddy streets to Hussein's place to sleep. The nightly hammering of outlying positions made the windows rattle and

shake as if the explosions were next door. After a few days, one got used to the nocturnal barrage and the racket became almost indistinguishable—or at least no more disturbing—than the snoring of the other men in the room.

Yes, after a few weeks, Samashki had become a normal town for me, filled with very normal people, people with histories, names, and even foibles. Imperceptibly at first, but with every day more so, I began shifting my focus away from war and in the direction of local humanity. I filmed farmers planting crops and children trying to study, even though there was no school. I got to be palsy with the ladies in the bazaar, and made a point to never miss communal prayers in the mosque and the inevitable discussion groups that would follow. And I began to think differently about my project. If Thornton Wilder could make a classic play out of the very complacency of a Grovers' Corners, could I not do the same for Samashki, and make a real-life Chechen version of *Our Town*? It would be slow, as far as television goes—but it would be different, something deep.

Still, I was obliged to protectively position myself in case the Russian military finally decided to fulfill its frequent vow to flatten the place. That meant that after fearful days on the periphery with Hussein and his men and fascinating evenings with the just-folks in Alkhazur's coffee shop, my nights usually consisted of waiting on a rooftop in anticipation of recording the death of the very same people who had been keeping me in food, housing, and companionship, and the destruction of the town—*our* town.

That might sound dramatic and awful and cynical, and it is, but the dynamic was more complex than that. The men I was with had accepted me into their lives so that I might be able to report on their activities in the largest sense. A tacit part of our contract was that I would probably have to record very real violence when it was visited upon them. The only way to draw attention to Samashki, and thus somehow impact American or world public opinion to move or persuade or force Moscow to cease and desist in the slaughter in Chechnya, would be to deliver visuals that were sufficiently dramatic to make viewers sit up and shout *"No! No! NO!"*

So long as the journalist can continue to believe that his or her reporting might indeed have that sort of impact or result—changing the world—the implicit contradictions and dangers of his or her situation are sustainable. The problem arises when one begins to understand that one is risking one's own life—and by extension the lives of those around him—not so much to edify or enlighten, but to *entertain.*

Ghoulish? Yes. Realistic? Absolutely: This is exactly the sort of thing that producers describe as "great TV."

And what is to be learned from such a sequence?

That people still believe in that totally contradictory principle that motivates rebels all over the world, namely, that they are willing to die in order to be free—and are quite happy to do it on television?

This book has taken me almost a decade to write because it has been so painful to remember and because it is about so many things: the Samashki massacre, Hussein, Chechnya, Russia, ethnicity, war, journalism, modern voyeuristic adventure, love, hate, betrayal, forgiveness, and a host of other subjects. But there are certain things this book is *not.* It is not, for example, a history of Chechnya, Russia, the Caucasus, or Soviet nationalities policy—although for the sake of context, I have included what I hope is a sufficient amount of information about all those subjects to serve as a potpourri Guide for the Perplexed.

What this book *is,* I hope, is an account of a confused and unhappy time in *one* human history, largely defined by but not restricted to the conflict as experienced in one small town in the self-styled Chechen Republic during its bid for independence from the post-Soviet Russian Federation, and as seen through the foggy lens of an imperfect outlander recorder who just happened to show up at that time and place.

My contact with Hussein has led me to ask a number of uncomfortable questions for myself and others involved in journalism, especially in areas and times of war and crisis. The main question might be: What responsibility does a journalist have to his or her subject? Are journalists perfectly neutral vessels who only see and record? Or does their very presence at critical moments make people act differ-

ently than they would have had the journalist not been there at all? What happens when *the story* becomes something more than that—when it becomes *life?* When does the observer affect the observed?

Thomas Goltz
2003
Livingston, Montana

1 THE GOLDEN BRIDGE

"Walk slowly and just say '*Da*' whenever I ask you anything—got it?"

"*Da,*" I said.

Isa, my guide and companion for the last two hours, looked at me and chuckled. "Are you scared already?" he asked.

"*Da,*" I replied truthfully. "But, in fact, I am only following your instructions."

Isa's cheeks jiggled and his large belly heaved as he suppressed a chuckle. "*Hehehe!*" he tittered, trying to hold his breath. It was actually not such a good joke, and hardly the opportune moment to enjoy it, even if it had been. We were halfway up the Baku–Rostov highway to the *Zalota Most,* or Golden Bridge, which we were going to cross illegally on our way to Chechnya at war. I was numb from a mixture of cold, fear, and several sleepless nights thinking about what I was about to do, but was determined to do it anyway.

It was February 1995, and the bridge represented the sole border post on the Azerbaijani–Russian frontier, and it was a bundle of contradictions. For starters, it had been officially closed a month before, when Moscow accused Baku of turning a blind eye to Chechen fighters and their supporters crossing on their way to Chechnya. And yet the bridge remained unofficially open. One reason was the fact that while the frontier in question was internationally recognized as that delineating the boundaries of Azerbaijan and the Russian Federation, that particular part of the Russian Federation was Dagestan, a sort of subrepublic, or state, populated by a crazy quilt of mainly non-Russian (and almost exclusively Muslim) ethnicities, including many Chechens

and Azeris. Their views about the Russian–Chechen conflict were quite different from those held by Boris Yeltsin and his advisors. While the latter thought it the most obvious place to intercept men and munitions on their way to Chechnya, the former were determined to keep the bridge open as an artery of supply.

Actually, the real reason the officially closed bridge and border remained unofficially open was more basic then the call of ethnic or religious solidarity. It had to do with cash.

"How are you feeling?" whispered Isa, when our communal taxi pulled off at the roadside shrine to Khidhir, the Muslim patron saint of sailors, travelers, and lost causes. It was the first time, for security purposes, that we had spoken since leaving Baku.

"*Normalno,*" I replied, shivering in the damp, Caspian winter chill. "Okay."

"Don't worry," hissed Isa. "We have it wired. *Wired!* The name says it all—*Zalota Most,* the 'Golden Bridge.' "

"What do you mean?"

"We call it that because everyone who works there gets rich," Isa explained. "Now give me some cash so that I can buy us through."

I slipped him a couple hundred dollars in smaller bills. Isa took one and stuffed it into the contribution box outside Khidhir's shrine, and looked on approvingly when I made my own donation. Then we walked back to our communal taxi and drove the next hour in silence, not speaking until we entered no-man's land.

My disguise—a two-month beard trimmed to Muslim style that was gray enough to make me a respected elder, a greatcoat covering the thirty-pound flak jacket I was wearing and a lamb's wool, Astrakhan-style *papakh* atop my head—seemed to be working. Coupled with my front-seat position, it had sufficed to keep our two other traveling companions' curiosity in check, thanks to the local code of silence in front of elders, who must speak before being spoken to. I had kept strict radio silence. Now I was breaking it.

"Doktor Teymur," he said in Russian from the back seat. "We have just crossed the *Zalota Most* over the Samur River! Is it good to be home?"

"Da," I said, on cue.

Suddenly, a white Djiguli sedan darted out of the darkness and blocked our path.

"Wha—?" cried our driver, and mutterings of concern from the two other passengers ricocheted around the car.

"Don't worry, friends, it's for us," hissed Isa, trying to reassure them. Then he turned to me. "Get out—now!"

"But my bags . . ."

"Go!!" barked Isa. "Your stuff will rejoin you on the other side! *Go!!*"

Things were going too fast: I was out of one car and into the other and a man sitting in the passenger seat turned to me to say "hello," revealing double rows of gold-capped teeth in so doing.

It was soon clear how he paid his dentist.

"Denge!" he commanded, and Isa forked over a small wad of twenty-dollar bills.

"It is not enough!" screeched the man after making a quick count.

"What do you mean?" said Isa. "You said one hundred bucks."[1]

"Each," said the man in the passenger seat. "The price of transportation has risen."

"This is a scandal!" growled Isa.

"That is the border," said the driver. "The choice is yours."

"Look, guys," Isa implored the pair. "We are really low on dough—let's make it an extra fifty and call it even."

The driver and man in the passenger seat exchanged glances.

"For the Muslim cause, boys," growled the driver, and took the extra cash. Then he turned on the ignition and hit the accelerator, screeching to a halt in front of the security gate.

"Doktor Teymur," Isa asked in a loud voice as we emerged from the car. "Do you have a cigarette?"

"Da," I replied, and gave him one.

"Remember what I told you," growled Isa, bending close as if to

---

1 The Russian vernacular for the American greenback is indeed pronounced "bucks."

get a light. "Just answer 'yes' to everything that sounds like a question. "These Russian dogs would sell their sisters, their mothers. Do you understand?"

"*Da,*" I said. The station was bathed in cheesy incandescent light, illuminating a knot of Russian soldiers standing near the barrier while others clambered like ants over a truck. Invisible dogs barked. A searchlight swung across an adjacent field. Then we started walking toward the barrier.

Isa and I had met the day before through the agency of an Azeri friend who specialized in dubious business ventures such as importing "class" cars for resale to the Baku *nouveau rich.* A late model Mercedes with only a few dents and bullet holes sold for around five thousand dollars. For an added premium charge of five hundred dollars, my contact once told me, he could have the cars taken off the INTERPOL hot car register. Although my contact never said as much, Isa seemed to be one of his primary sources for such "used" vehicles.

But that was before the war in Chechnya exploded in November 1994. After that, trade had dried up. Whether he really had been in the stolen car business or in some more legitimate trade, in February 1995 Isa was unemployed and needed cash. I had some cash and was in need of a man who knew how to move things along difficult roads and over borders—like me. As such, we were a perfect fit; we were both desperate.

The reason for my desperation was pretty straightforward. Having accepted—no, pursued—a contract with ABC's *Nightline* to sally forth to Chechnya at war to create a one-man documentary on "the Chechen Spirit," made on the basis of my unique ties, language ability, and cultural connectivity, I had traveled from Montana to Philadelphia to Washington to New York to Istanbul to London to Istanbul to Baku, only to run up against the proverbial brick wall. My pals in the pan-Turkic crowd in Istanbul had talked big, but failed to provide anything except lofty platitudes and empty promises. Ditto for my "high-level" contacts among the Chechen diaspora.

I wanted the program to air on February 23, the anniversary of the "Day of Chechen Genocide." Alternatively, I wanted to be inside Chechnya in order to capture on film whatever happened on that most resonant day in the Chechen communal psyche. But the project had been dogged by problems from the start. Specifically, the Video News International agency that had subcontracted me to ABC's *Nightline* seemed unable to come up with any of the requisite paraphernalia for the venture, ranging from airline tickets to combat zone insurance and even cash. After wasting a week of precious time on the East Coast of the United States, I finally accepted a package of vague terms on faith and boarded a plane to Istanbul, ready to start swimming in familiar waters—and it was already mid-February.

After some useless meetings with official Chechen emissaries, I checked into the offices of the Chechen Solidarity Committee in the smog-invested Lalali quarter of Istanbul. The office, located above a coffee house on a side street with a name that never would be registered on any postman's beat, was the throbbing hub of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey—that is, the descendants of the small Muslim nations who had fled the North Caucasus to Ottoman Turkey after the Czarist armies had conquered the region one hundred and fifty years before. Although there were posters and other cultural paraphernalia relating to the other seven nations of the North Caucasus, the emphasis was heavily and unabashedly slanted on Chechnya. Portraits of the two implacable nineteenth-century resistance leaders, Imam Shamil and his predecessor, Sheikh Mansour, framed that of the current Chechen president, Djohar Dudayev. Nearby hung the green, white, red and black Chechen flag—the colors standing for religion, purity, blood and mourning, respectively—replete with the presidential symbol of an alert gray wolf on its haunches. On the wall behind the director's chair, written in *Noxchi* (Chechen) with a convenient Turkish translation, were the words to the Chechen national anthem.

We came into this world like the cub of a wolf
Like the lion, growling at dawn,

And were given our name!
La illah il Allah!
Our mothers suckled us in the hawk's nest
Our fathers taught us to fight in the horse's saddle
Our elders raised us for the people, for the country!
We learned to sing the dirge of danger!
La illah il Allah!

Establishing my bona fides with an intense young man named Fazil Özen who served as the director of the center, I was allowed to try and find a group of volunteers into which I might "embed" myself. As the primary contact point for Diaspora and traveling Chechens, the center attracted a weird mix of second- and third-generation "Chechen Turks" from Anatolian villages who had suddenly rediscovered their identity but spoke no Chechen or Russian, fourth- and fifth-generation "Chechen Arabs" from Jordan and Syria who were actually closer to Chechenness than their "Turkish" cousins, and finally, a truly motley crew of real Russian Chechens who needed or wanted help and assistance to return home via the underground railroad to fight the good fight. It was strange and wonderful and chilling, watching volunteerism at work. One young man, who said he knew me from Sukhumi (although he was on the other side of the lines in the Abkhaz war), wanted me to travel with him. He seemed like a perfect subject for my project of explaining, through film, what the Chechen spirit was all about.

"*Sukhumi,*" he spat. "That was playing at war. Stick with me, and I'll show you the real thing!"

My new friends at the Solidarity Committee cautioned me against this.

"Don't you understand?" hissed Fazil. "Those kids *are going to their deaths!*"

Other visitors were suspect, and Fazil warned me against talking openly about my plans. Keeping a low profile was almost impossible, though, due to the surprisingly bad local language ability of my new

friends. Twice I was seconded to be a Russian-Turkish translator at an interrogation of a couple of suspected agents because Fazil's Chechen was insufficient to conduct the interview and the individuals in question spoke nothing but Chechen and Russian. I hasten to add that I in no way considered myself competent for such a task, although I performed as best I could.

"Where were you in September 1993?"

"Well, I was tending the sheep on the Sovieteski Kolkoz, when suddenly I heard the *ehtKHizor* and the *bvf ofhe hnasdfo* resounding *in garble garble.*"

"Did he say *Soviet?*"

"Well, yes—but . . ."

"He is an agent provocateur!" snarled Fazil, who equated anything "Soviet" with "Russian," including place names such as collective farms.

One thing though, was certain: the Caucasus Culture Group/ Chechen Solidarity Center must have been staked out and penetrated by at least three intelligence services—the Turkish MIT, the Russian Federal Security Agency (the renamed KGB), and of course the CIA. Perhaps Fazil let me hang around precisely because he assumed I worked for the last agency and that my real mission was to help.

Contacts established, arrangements made and escape routes planned, I packed my bags in anticipation of the early morning flight from Istanbul to Baku and beyond. In anticipation of rough stuff, I was traveling as light as I could, but still had an inventory of things that would match that cited by the Ismaelia war-bound correspondent in Evelyn Waugh's classic, *Scoop.* In addition to my customized camera, body armor, and Kevlar helmet, I was toting an emergency medical kit that would have landed me in jail on drug-smuggling charges almost anywhere in the world. The two basic dopes were Dolantine, a sort of lazy man's morphine, used to break the pain of shrapnel lacerations and gunshot wounds, and Atropine, a jump-starter for heart-attack victims, in case I found myself going into shock and de-

cided to do something about it. Hopefully, self-administration of either would happen with the right ampule. I was also carrying diverse pep pills and instant-action vitamins designed for athletes, in case I had to climb a mountain one fine night.

Clotheswise, I was packing a customized cross-country skier's wardrobe: tights and turtleneck that absorbed sweat away from the body but retained heat, a fleece pullover with a kangaroo pouch for frozen fingers or diverse equipment, quick-dry windbreaker pants with reinforced knees and butt, instant heat packs for fingers and toes, a ski cap that could be pulled down so far as to cover the throat as well as nose and mouth, anti-glare ski goggles, a high-tech flashlight designed to be worn like a miner's lamp on your head, two pairs of anti-ice traction claws for my lifelong-guaranteed water-and-cold-resistant boots, and even a pair of high-flotation, superlightweight snowshoes. Lest I appear out of place in my survival attire, I also brought along a well-worn dark blue overcoat that was missing two buttons. It served not only as a windbreaker and blanket, but also as a sort of generic Eastern European war refugee disguise, and was especially effective in this capacity when topped by my gray Chechen *papakh,* or Astrakhan sheepskin hat. For food, I packed two pounds of whole espresso-roasted coffee beans to chew as an energy aid, and two hundred and fifty grams of whole cloves to kill hunger. It might sound like a lot, but actually, the single biggest item was the camera kit: a Sony 3-chip Hi-8 job with boom mike, LAV interview attachment, and Bogan tripod, as well as a clam-oyster miniature remote viewing/dubbing unit and about 50 pounds of tapes and extra batteries. Or so it seemed.

In retrospect, the sheer volume and weight of this kit sounds ridiculous. The idea was to achieve autonomy; what it did was create the need for assistants and bearers. I subsequently ditched half of it.

I tried to sleep, but in vain. It was the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, and the *muezzins* calling the faithful to midnight and dawn prayers in the grand mosques around Sultan Ahmet Square vied with one another to see who could extend their plaintive, amplified cries the longest. The *ezan,* which usually lasts around five minutes at most, seemed to last for a half an hour, one disembodied voice picked up

where the last had left off. One particularly clear and beautiful voice seemed to have converted the Muslim creed into a scat song. *Allahul Akhbar, Allahul Akhbar!*

I lay on the bed, channel-surfing between Turkish TV and international channels and thought about the project at hand. Of all those I had dealt with, the most memorable were the two youths I had met at the Solidarity Center who had fought in Sukhumi, and were now returning for more war. *Sukhumi a game? A rehearsal?* I had nearly gone down with the ship there, along with my friend and colleague Lawrence Sheets from Reuters. Just how bad could Chechnya be? And now I, too, was going back to war—and the images that passed on the television screen had little to do with my memory of that subject: men without limbs, half-shrouded women's bodies lying in muddy streets, brains dribbling on the pavement, and rows of dead children lined up in blood-stained snow. I got up and started retching. I continued for hours, finally drawing blood from my stomach. I wanted to think it was something I had eaten, but knew better.

I was scared, really scared.

For someone trying to make a discreet entrance into frontline Azerbaijan, mine was not an auspicious start. The arrivals section of the new international air terminal outside Baku was packed with old friends and acquaintances from all walks of life. There were oilmen and diplomats and spies returning to post from R&R vacation leave and dozens of Azeri citizens who smiled and shouted greetings when they saw me to their prodigal son returned. Many of the security guards and official shakedown artists who passed for customs officials were old friends from the war in Karabkah. One reached out and kissed me on both cheeks and had a long chuckle when I sent his metal detector screaming: the body armor I was wearing had considerably more resonance than the usual watches, rings, cufflinks, and cigarette lighters his metal detector machine was geared to deal with.

Indeed, seemingly everyone I knew—or at least appropriate representatives of different segments of society—was at the airport waiting

for my plane. Everyone, that is, except the people I expected to meet: the Chechens assigned to spirit me from the airport with minimal fuss, and smuggle me across the mountains and into war.

I waited for an hour, glad-handing old friends whom I really did not want to see and then just fending off persistent taxi drivers. At first I hoped that one would whisper to me that *he was the one*, but none of those who approached me uttered anything like a password. When the last of the men holding signs designating MISTER SMITH and MASTER JONES disappeared I knew that something had gone very wrong. I was in Baku and none of the contacts I had so assiduously cultivated in Istanbul (and London and New York and Washington and even New Jersey) had come through.

Finally, I hailed a taxi and asked him to take me into town to the Hotel Azerbaijan. I had no intention of staying there, but they did have a satellite telephone, and I wanted to call Istanbul to find out why no one had met me as arranged, and what was going on, generally speaking. Fazil Özen was evasive, and suggested I return to Istanbul where we could have a more intimate conversation. *Return to Istanbul?* I demanded more information, and he became a little more specific. The Russians, possibly tipped off by Turkish intelligence, were rolling up one of the networks that led through Baku. He could not tell me any more on the phone. *Click.*

I was on my own. Or rather, it was time to check in with my own Baku network to see what was really what. I called a well-informed diplomat pal and arranged to meet him at a bar favored by the pan-Turkic crowd known as the Gray Wolves, who were said to be actively supporting the Chechens with men and arms. Even before the diplomat arrived I had the scene assessed, but he filled in more gaps. The Russians had intercepted a satellite telephone conversation between Djohar Dudayev and the Azerbaijani Gray Wolf leader, Iskender Hamidov, and leaked the entire transcript to the Moscow press. In it, Iskender reassured Djohar that "another delivery of 'metal' " from Turkey was on its way via Dagestan, and that more of his men were scheduled to slip across the frontier and join in the good fight.

It was pretty damning material, and suggested open collusion be-

tween Dudayev, Hamidov, and his Turkish backers against the Russians. It was also highly embarrassing to Azerbaijani President Heydar Aliyev, because the content of the conversation suggested that he either tolerated anti-Russian activities on his fiefdom, or that he was out to lunch and unaware that any such activities were going on. This was all bad news.

I still had a few strings to pull, however. The first was to make direct contact with Iskender Hamidov and see if I could hitch a ride with him and his men if and when he made another cross border run. While putting out feelers in this direction (I assumed his phones were tapped by everyone with an interest in the internal politics of Azerbaijan), I also called on another old friend. I shall call him "Towfiq," a man whose business interests included stolen cars and Chechen drivers.

"This is me," I said into the telephone.

"My dear!" Towfiq exclaimed. "I thought you had left us for good!"

"All lies," I replied. "But I must see you—*now*."

"I will pick you up in ten minutes."

He was there in five

"My dear, it is so good to see you again!" Towfiq began with the standard niceties. "A problem at customs? A woman? Are you moving back to us and need a house? I have one that is empty now. I am married and I got rid of my mistress. You can have her, too, and both our problems will be solved."

"Congratulations on your marriage."

"Thank you."

"Introduce me to your Chechen friends."

At two o'clock I was standing on the quayside near the disused tennis club, trying hard to look like I was doing something other than waiting. At five minutes after the hour two men crossed the street.

One was short, dark, and ugly. He wore a leather jacket that looked like it concealed a weapon tucked in his belt, and had a shabby, gray *papakh* crushed down around his ears that looked like the conical hat was upside down. The other was tall, fair-haired, and handsome. He wore a maroon mackintosh-style overcoat, but no hat at all. They were, I decided, the hit man and the boss, respectively. They introduced

themselves as Isa and Hamid, and suggested we go some place quiet to talk.

I had already selected the apartment of a best-nameless opera singer-cum-oil company caterer as a safe house. It was the least likely place I could think to be bugged. We split up and found our own ways to the address, met on the second floor, and entered without saying a word before turning the stereo on high. (Verdi, I believe.) We had a tentative deal within an hour, predicated on a mixture of patriotic zeal and self-interest.

I had envisaged a mountain-goat path over the snow; they insisted on a straight shot through the front door—the Golden Bridge across the Azerbaijani–Russian frontier.

Decisions had to be made. I could put my life in the hands of two total strangers of an ethnic persuasion notorious for crimes such as kidnapping, or pursue the Gray Wolf option and go with men I at least knew—but did not think much of. I could also declare that it all had become too complex and dangerous and simply back out and go home to Montana and spend the winter skiing. I needed consultation, so I went up to the Martyrs' Lane Cemetery to walk around the graves of friends and acquaintances killed in Karabakh—but none of the dead could tell me what to do. So I took a long stroll downhill in the direction of the Foreign Ministry. By chance, two old friends who worked inside were standing out front smoking cigarettes. They were the deputy foreign minister and his assistant, or more specifically, my old friends Araz and Elchin.

"Iskender Hamidov is making our lives rather difficult right now," commented Elchin, the assistant. "Russia is talking about closing the frontier due to his antics."

"I am merely a public servant in the government of a small and confused country, and hardly in the position to advise you about the preferred way to violate our frontiers, let alone those of our neighbors," said Araz. "But, as your friend I would strongly advise you to stay away from the politicians and travel with the businessmen."

"Meaning—"

"The interests of the latter are constant—money; the interests of

the former change according to exigency. And all indications are that a crackdown is coming."

I made two calls from the street. The first was to Iskender Hamidov's organization. It was designed to throw anyone interested in my movements off the track. I said I would call the next day to make final arrangements for the trip north. Then I found a second telephone and called Isa and Hamid and confirmed that we were leaving that night.

We were stopped seven more times between the Golden Bridge and the Dagestan capital, Mahachkale, and each checkpoint brought my colon into my throat. A brace of Russian soldiers would emerge from the darkness into our headlights and point to the side of the road. We would stop and nervously wait while the soldiers went through our documents.

"Bismillah," I would mutter, using the Muslim Arabic formula for evoking the name of God.

In Islamic historiography, celebrated as mysterious fact by millions of pilgrims to Mecca during the annual *hajj,* there is a story of the Prophet Muhammad. Pursued by the evil Quresh tribe, whose aim it was to stamp out monotheism and celebrate polytheism, he took refuge in a cave in Mount Arafat. The Quresh arrived at the mouth of the cave, only to discover a spider's web hanging over the entrance. "He cannot possibly be here, otherwise the spider's web would have been shattered," reasoned the Quresh, and moved on—thus leaving Muhammad alive. The Prophet, through whom the religion known as Islam was delivered to mankind, lived. And now I was Muhammad in that cave across two hundred miles of Daghestani police and KGB checkpoints, because a spider's web of innocence descended over my backseat place every time we were pulled over.

"Bismillah," I would breathe, and become invisible.

We were stopped often and the drill was always the same. The uniformed men with guns would approach the driver's window and ask for papers; the same men or their mates would shift over to the passenger window and demand the same—and then, when the two

men sitting in front were cleared after a few questions, they would turn to the back seat.

"Bismillah," I would breathe, as Isa faced the music.

Next came my turn.

It never came. It was as if I did not exist, that there was no fourth person in the car.

And as the *bismillah* night turned into the inchoate *bismillah* dawn, a near-atheist, non-Muslim like me had difficulty in ascribing my salvation to anything other than Divine Protection or Intervention, and of the Islamic variety, given the references and words and languages evoked in time of extreme need. Indeed, by the time we arrived at the Mahachkale train and bus station I was obsessed with two thoughts. The first was that I, traveling incognito, had passed eight security checkpoints on what should have been the most tightly controlled road in all of Russia, but that I was *in*, which was good, and no doubt the Will of God.

The second thought mitigated the piety of the first: My success at sneaking into Russia at war was predicated on a level of corruption so far beyond anything I might have imagined, that logically I could not trust anyone, ever, anywhere. Not the border guards, not the taxi drivers—not even Isa. In a word, I was in way over my head and, no matter which way you pitched the equation, dependent on thieves. And someday I would have to rely on them to get back *out* the way I had come.

Bismillah.

Khazavyurt was a dirty little regional center in western Dagestan. But the majority of the population was ethnically Chechen, people with relatives across the frontier. With the start of hostilities in December, and especially during the siege and destruction of Grozny, it had become one of the two centers for displaced people, as well as a jumping-off place for press people trying to cover the conflict. The other was the tiny republic of Ingushetia to the west of Chechnya.

But while there were plenty of refugees camping in schools, homes,

and doorways throughout the town, there was no trace of the Western press. My hack-pack pals seemed to have been forcibly cleared out some days before as part of a general informational crackdown. So, at three in the morning, Isa and I were obliged to wake up the guards at the Chechen nationalist headquarters and refugee meeting point and beg for a place to bed down for the remainder of the night. The room was cold and stunk of something. In the morning, we discovered ourselves to be in the sickbay. Behind the open bucket of water we had drunk from hung a sign that read: *Cholera Warning!*

Khazavyurt, as suggested, was a conduit in and out of Chechnya, and as such must or should have been ringed by KGB cameras and agents. Isa assumed so, anyway, and advised me to stick to myself while he went about making arrangements for our transfer across the frontier. This was frustrating, because the headquarters-refugee center and the street outside soon filled up with a mass of people. In any other circumstance I would have initiated conversations in order to cop a tearful tale to use in a generic refugee story. Instead, I was obliged to sit inside the building, acting like a refugee myself by studying the lists of names tacked up on the walls for missing loved ones, so saddened by loss that I spoke to no one for hours on end. For the first time I was made aware of the constraints imposed by my unorthodox mode of entry.

Toward noon a white sedan came roaring up to the building.

"Let's go!" barked Isa in Russian, making no effort to maintain the fiction of my being anything other than a foreigner. "Get your stuff and be snappy. Some fink told the Russians about a suspected foreign spy around here, and that means you!"

We roared down a country lane that might have been regarded as pretty in better times, enjoying nothing and looking over our shoulders to see if we were being pursued.

"Toi matz!" cursed the driver in Russian, yanking the wheel and cutting down a tractor path. "They have pulled local security and replaced them all with Special Forces!"

The junction we had been heading toward was manned by large, fair-haired men in combat gear: Russians, and not Dagestanis. Happily,

their attention was directed at traffic coming in the other direction, from Chechnya, and they did not seem to notice our detour. Bumping across the open field, we arrived at a farmhouse overlooking a derelict hydroelectric dam strung across the Akchay River. Access was restricted by lines of barbed wire. The ford was half a mile downstream, framed by a bridge that had buckled in the middle, blown either by the Russians as an act of nastiness or, more likely, destroyed by Chechen sabotage to prevent Russian armor from crossing.

"We'll have to cross on foot," said Isa.

A couple of youths were sitting on cement blocks on the far side of the dam. Seeing us, they almost snapped to attention—and then went into action.

"Wait until they give us the signal to cross," said Isa, peering downstream toward the fording point. A line of cars and buses was strung out on the far bank, waiting their turn to be pulled across the river. In the middle of the stream, a tractor was pulling a flatbed truck piled high with mattresses, rugs, and the other household possessions of a group of new refugees who sat atop the precarious load, swaying as the vehicle dipped into and rose out of the deeper water troughs. When it arrived on our side, a dozen armed men surrounded the vehicle, and ordered the refugees down while they started an inspection.

"Now!" hissed Isa.

We speed-strolled down a cow path leading from the farmhouse to the river, coming even with the dam. In a move amazing for a man of his girth, Isa then ducked through a hole out in the barbwire fence and scuttled across. I was right behind him.

"In here!" cried one of the scouts, and we scurried into a small alcove cut in the bushes and small trees on the far side of the dam.

"Welcome to Chechnya," said Isa with a smile.

2 A ROGUE REPUBLIC RECALLED

From a distance Chechnya may have appeared to be a land of noble warriors fighting an uphill battle over sacred ground against amazing odds. But closer historical inspection revealed the war as being part of a larger context—namely, the ethnonational policies that pertained in the seventy-year failed experiment called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

The subject of the national structure of the defunct USSR was and is confusing to many outsiders. During the bad old days of the Cold War, the shorthand used to describe the main communist adversary of the United States was simply "Russia," which by definition was a large country filled with enemy "Russians."

The reality, of course, was somewhat different. Ideology aside, at the time of its demise the central government of the Soviet Union recognized no less than 128 discrete ethnic groups living in 53 state-like entities, ranging from the 15 Union Republics of the USSR (Armenia, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, etc., etc.) to a hodgepodge of autonomous republics, autonomous regions, and autonomous districts within those same 15 "titular" republics. This setup, based on the concept of "national self-determination" accommodated the social, cultural, and political aspirations of all recognized ethnic majorities and minorities living in the lands of the Soviet state, and made the USSR unique from virtually every other sociopolitical experimental structure in the world. It was the theoretical opposite of the American "melting pot," and might be best described as "the icebox," a place where minute differences of linguistic dialect and national culture were

to be frozen in time forever, enshrined as the ultimate in enlightened ethnic engineering.

In practice, however, the policy of polyethnic promotion left a lot to be desired. While most of the hundred-odd ethnic entities in the USSR enjoyed the accoutrements of self-government, they all lacked the substance of sovereignty. Most may have had something resembling a parliament, but all real decisions were made by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the Kremlin in Moscow.

That all changed in the wake of the abortive putsch against Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev of August 19, 1991. First, the fifteen Union Republics, including Russia itself, began issuing declarations of national sovereignty. But, no sooner had they done that than many of the two-score "autonomous" ethnic republics *within* the Union republics began clamoring for *their* right to become newly independent countries, too. Not to be left out, still smaller ethnic entities existing within the subrepublics or autonomous districts within the new titular states began clamoring for their own right to autonomy.

Famously, one neighborhood in Moscow announced its intent to secede from the rest of the city and become—what? A new internationally recognized neighborhood?

Ridiculous communal aspirations aside, the biggest question to emerge from the ruins of the USSR was quite simply: *What was Russia?*

Up until 1991 and the meteoric rise of Boris Yeltsin, "Russia" almost did not exist. In Yeltsin's words, it was a "ghost state," a place that had physically defined borders but almost none of the other usual trappings of nationhood, in the usual sense of the word—or even those institutions that the Kremlin had bestowed upon the other fourteen Union Republics that made up the USSR, and even the non-Russian, ethnic-based entities that made up the Russian Federation itself.

There was no Russian Academy of Sciences.

There was no Russian police force.

There was not even a Russian Communist Party.

The reason for this, of course, was the virtual identification of "Rus-

sia" with the USSR during the seventy-year Soviet experiment, both inside the USSR and outside of it. The official language of the USSR was Russian. The official culture, from the Bolshoi Ballet to vodka binge-drinking, was Russian. When citizens of the USSR as disparate as Abkhaz from Georgia and Tajiks from Uzbekistan traveled abroad, they were regarded as and almost always accepted themselves as "Russians," even if their bloodlines contained not one drop of slav-ness, and even if their domiciles were in Sukhumi or Tashkent.

None of this seemed to make much difference, so long as the USSR was a closed system where everybody listened to and obeyed the dictates of the Politburo in the Kremlin. Elections might be held for the local *Sovyet,* or parliament, in, say, the Komi Autonomous Republic on the Artic circle, but everyone knew that that institution was just window dressing. It was the Central Committee in Moscow that made *real* decisions.

Then came the era of stagnation under Leonid Brezhnev in the 1970s, followed by the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s and the introduction of the twin concepts of *Glasnost* and *Peristroika.* People were allowed and even encouraged to start thinking and talking about how to make a better Soviet Union, which of course meant thinking and talking about what was wrong with it. And in the chat box, the first rumblings of ethnic dissent were first heard. By the late 1980s, the rumblings had turned into a roar.

"Sovereignty and Self-Determination!" was the cry taken up by newly formed national fronts cropping up all over the lands of the USSR—including, oddly enough, the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. From a mixed crew of dissident human rights activists to right-wing racist dreamers, there emerged a man who would eventually prove himself to be more than Mihkail Gorbachev's match: Boris Yeltsin.

Now is not the time or place to go into a detailed biography of Yeltsin or a treatment of his showdown with Gorbachev. Both have written their own books on the breakup of the Soviet Union, and books have been written about them and the process in which they were both intimately involved. Suffice it to say that, whatever Yeltsin's

real motives for breaking with Gorbachev and the so-called reformist wing of the Communist Party, his rise to the top of the "Russia First" movement and his election as Speaker of the Congress of Peoples' Deputies of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in May 1990 was the most direct challenge to Gorbachev's authority that could be imagined. For the first time in Soviet history, there was an alternative power structure to the Kremlin—a *Russian* parliament. And it soon began passing decree after decree, ranging from the establishment of Russian security ministries down to and including Russia's right *to secede from the USSR*—an act tantamount to seceding from itself.

Due to the obsession with Gulf War One at the time, little of this state-altering process was appreciated by the West. With George Bush (the elder) standing off against Saddam Hussein in Kuwait, who needed to know about the so-called "parade of sovereignties" at play in the USSR? But, while the world watched CNN discover almost real-time bombing in and around the Gulf, the political scene in "the Evil Empire" very quickly started to resemble a flood akin to the water-fetching broomstick in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*. Everyone, from the exiled Volga Germans and transplanted Koreans (not to mention the Yakutians-cum-Sakhas and Sochi-based Shapsugs) was demanding chunks of territory, or at least formal recognition of their "autonomous" status. If there was anything resembling order in the chaos, the common point in most of the declarations was that everyone wanted to move up at least a notch on the Soviet-style sovereignty ladder.

The "autonomous republics" inside the Russian Federation, for example, rejected the word "autonomous," and claimed to be full-fledged republics with equal status with the largest entity in the Russian Federation itself, namely, the Russian Republic. By early 1992, things were getting nasty. "Sovereignty" among the ethnic entities that made up the Federation was starting to look very much like claims to the right to secede from it—just as the various Union Republics, including the Russian Federation, had separated from the USSR. Like Gorbachev's desperate (and failed) attempts to save the USSR by get-

ting all the Union Republics to sign on to a new Union Treaty, Boris Yeltsin embarked on his own mission to define (or redefine) Russia.

The result was the new Russian constitution of 1993 that defined the Russian Federal state as consisting of 89 federal units, broken up into 57 administrative territories and 32 ethnically-based entities, including 21 republics, one autonomous territory, and 10 autonomous districts.

There were two dissenting regions, however.

The first was Tatarstan (formerly known in Soviet times as the Autonomous Republic of Tataria), the titular homeland of the Turkic-speaking Muslim people who essentially ruled what we today call Russia from their capital of Kazan, before the rise of the Principality of Moscovy during the Middle Ages. There, the new nationalist president Mintimer Shaimiev held out until 1994, before signing off on a "Treaty on Mutual Delimitation and Delegation of Authority." It contained a clause saying that the constitution of the Republic of Tatarstan could "coexist" with the constitution that bound the rest of the Russian Federation together, despite significant contradictions between the two legal charters. In real terms, the Tatars had managed to achieve everything except de jure independence from Russia.

The same sort of sweetheart deal was offered to the other holdout republic. But, either due to the failure of the leadership to know when to stop raising the stakes, or possibly due to sheer force of circumstance and the weight of history, the leadership and citizenry of the second holdout state declined to sign off on either the Treaty of Federation or the new Russian constitution. No, it had not "boycotted" either referendum due to any specific reservations or criticism of the documents. The citizens of said state did not bother to vote because they said they were not, had never been, and never would be a voluntary part of Russia—whether Czarist, Soviet or post-Soviet. They were and had always been citizens of a free and independent state, and it did not matter one iota if anybody else in the world thought so or not. If the rest of the world had heard of that country before, it was by the name Chechnya.

The word "Chechen" is a Russianized version of the name of one of the first villages encountered by Czarist Russian troops during an early campaign in the North Caucasus, a place called Chechen-aul. The "Chechen" people call themselves *Noxchi*. Along with their Ingush cousins to the West (who call themselves *Ghalgai*), the Chechens refer to the larger ethnolinguistic community as *Vainakh*—which translates as "the free people."

The Chechens have lived on the timbered slopes of the northeastern Caucasus mountain range for at least four thousand years and have every right to claim that they are one of the original peoples of the region. Groups of invaders ranging from the Mongols to the Persians might take control of the lowlands from time to time, but the Chechens would merely melt into the mountains and conduct guerrilla wars against them until the (most recent) invader departed.

Then came the advent of Islam as a factor in Chechen communal life in the eighteenth century, and the emergence of the first identifiable leader of the territory now known as Chechnya. The agent of this change was a young theological student by the name of Ushurma, who took the name Sheikh Mansour ("victory") when he announced a *ghazavat*, or holy war, to drive invading infidels from Caucasian Muslim lands. He enjoyed his greatest victory against the Russians in 1785 at the Battle of the Sunja River, when his forces destroyed an entire Russian brigade and captured heavy guns and other military supplies. Victory brought belief, and the number of his *murids* ("pious followers") swelled to an army of more than twenty thousand believers in Mansour's brand of militant Sufi Islam. *Murid* attacks on the so-called "Caucasus line" of cossack strongholds along the Terek River secured ever more arms and attracted even more believers across a wide spectrum of North Caucasus Muslims. Then fate entered the lists on the Russian side. While visiting an Ottoman Turkish fortress near the Black Sea, Mansour was captured when Russian forces attacked, not even knowing he was inside at the time.

Sheikh Mansour died in Russian captivity in 1794, and the Russian campaign of conquest in the Caucasus continued by fits and starts. In

1817, the Czar's court in St. Petersburg moved the southern border of the Russian state to the Sunja River, and founded the fortress city of Grozny—a word meaning "terrible" in memory of Czar Ivan's nickname and meant to send a message to the unruly tribes in the region of what was in store for them if they did not submit.

The first to fall were the Circassian Muslims living along the Black Sea coast. Due to a mixture of geographic vulnerability, class difference, and inability to organize joint resistance against the common Russian foe, resistance collapsed and a flood of refugees began washing up on the Ottoman Turkish Black Sea coastline. Typhoid and diphtheria claimed more victims than Russian bayonets, and to this day the Abkhaz and Adagi diaspora in Turkey say they do not eat sea fish, in memory of their ancestors whose corpses had to be thrown overboard lest their infested cadavers claim more lives on the way to Trabzon.[2]

To the east, meanwhile, new resistance to the Russian imperial push into the Caucasus began to stir. It came in the form of yet another ecstatic, Sufi-inspired Muslim cleric, this time an Avar tribesman from Dagestan. His name was Imam Shamil, and his legacy is writ large across the lands of the North and South Caucasus. His twenty-six-year-long *ghazavat,* or holy war, ended only when the Czar's army of forty thousand men and artillery managed to surround the mountain village of Gunib, deep in Shamil's native Dagestan. On August 25, 1859, Russian forces stormed the town.

Remarkably, perhaps, Shamil was treated with dignity after his capture. After being paraded around St. Petersburg, he was held under house arrest in Kiev, where he was visited by friends and scholars and the assorted royal curiosity seekers. He was even a guest at the wedding of the son of the czar in 1866. Then, in 1870, his health failing, Shamil was allowed to perform pilgrimages to the holy Muslim cities of Mecca and Medina. In 1871, fulfilling the wish of all believing Muslims, Shamil was blessed by death during his *hajj* and buried in

---

2 Cf. Justin McCarthy's *Death and Exile: the Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims, 1821–1922* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995).

Medina, the city where the Prophet Muhammad breathed his last some twelve hundred years before.

Muslim resistance to Russian rule—there is little evidence to suggest that anything remotely resembling a national or ethnic consciousness existed in the North Caucasus at the time—continued in the form of localized revolts whenever Russian authority seemed to wane. The biggest and indeed permanent waning of czarist power, of course, came in the form of the Russian Revolution of 1917.

A baffling, complex picture of five-sided war and sudden, shifting alliances emerges. On one hand were "nationalist" Chechens seeking first German and Ottoman-Turkish, and then English aid against the Bolsheviks, who in turn were allied with "traditionalist" Chechens seeking to impose *Shariah*, or Islamic law. Half a dozen rival republics, some that included the Terek cossacks and some that excluded them, were declared in cities or towns as various as Vladikavkaz in today's Ossetia, Temir Khan Shura in Dagestan, and even Batumi, capital of the Georgian Black Sea region now known as Adjaria.

In the main, though, it is generally accurate to say that the Chechens and other North Caucasus Muslims fought alongside Reds against Whites, thanks to Lenin's promise of self-determination to the peoples of the East. One might argue that, in the case of the Chechens, self-determination had less to do with national aspirations than religious ones, as made manifest in the nature and name of the last, pre-Soviet "Chechen" state—the self-styled North Caucasus Emirate. Declared by the Avar Sheikh Uzun Hajji ("the tall pilgrim") in September 1919, and anticipating the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan set up by the Taliban almost eighty years later, it was a fundamentalist state nonpareil. The penalty for anyone caught writing left to right—in other words, in any other script than Arabic (or Ottoman Turkish and Persian, both based on Arabic)—was death. Despite obvious differences in aims, the Emirate made common cause with the Reds against the Whites, until the alliance of convenience no longer suited the Bolsheviks, who

then put paid to the "tall pilgrim's" pious pretensions. A last-blast revolt was sounded in August 1920 by one Sheikh Najmuddin (Gotsinskii) in collusion with Imam Shamil's grandson, Said Bey under the banner "national liberation and the *Shariah* state."

Then Chechnya—or, more accurately, the Chechens—disappeared into the newly created Autonomous Mountain Socialist Soviet Republic, a constituent part of the newly created Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic that would soon become the core of the newly created Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Chechen's new national status was enhanced in 1924 by the creation of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, that added Ingush-inhabited areas to the west of traditional Chechen lands. If not an independent entity, for the first time the concept of a specific territory was associated with a specific people called Chechens. In 1929, cossack-inhabited areas to the north, including the city of Grozny (where only a handful of Chechens dwelled) were added, thus finalizing the territorial concept of the CIAR within the RSFSR, at least in theory.

Following Hitler's invasion of the USSR in 1941, however, continued acts of sabotage and desertions of Chechen and Ingush draftees from the Red army were declared to be of a pro-Nazi character. So long as he was on the defensive, Stalin could do nothing. But by late 1943 and early 1944, thanks in large part to a massive supply of lend-lease weapons and machinery from the United States, the tide turned. For Stalin, this meant it was time to permanently solve the problem of the Chechens and other problematic peoples in the Caucasus along lines proposed by diverse czarist generals, but never implemented: ethnic cleansing.

The *Vysl*, or Deportation, was mounted on the night of February 23–24, 1944—and under the cover of celebrations associated with Red Army Day. By February 29, NKVD boss Lavrentii Beria was able to send Stalin the following, chillingly mechanical telegram:

"I report the results of the operation of resettling Chechens and Ingushi. The resettlement was begun on February 23 in the majority of districts, with the exception of the high mountain population points. . . .

478,479 persons were evicted and loaded onto special railway cars, including 91,250 Ingush. One hundred and eighty special trains were loaded, of which 159 were sent to the new designated place."

The "designated place" was the midwinter wasteland of Central Asia and Siberia, and by the time the trains arrived in central Kazakhstan about a quarter of the people packed into the boxcars perished either of cold, starvation, or typhus spread by unburied corpses. Still more died after the survivors were dumped off the trains and told to fend for themselves in the middle of the harsh Central Asian winter.

Reduced from some 400,000 in 1940 to some 200,000 or so at the end of WWII, the Chechen population soon surged. In 1959 the number of Chechens throughout the USSR stood at some 420,000. By 1970 that number had grown to 612,000. A decade later, the number had grown to 755,000. By the time of the last Soviet census in 1989, the Chechens were counted as being just shy of a million souls. And the vast majority of those were no longer living in Kazakhstan or elsewhere in Central Asia—but in the re-created (and slightly truncated) Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic in the Russian Federation.

The process of return began in the immediate aftermath of Stalin's death in 1953, and then gathered steam in 1956–57 when Nikita Khruschev moved to rehabilitate most of the nationalities suppressed by Stalin. In 1957 alone, 48,000 Chechen families returned to their ancient homeland in the Caucasus from Central Asian exile. And, if the Chechens had been lacking the concept of nation before the traumatic events of 1944, they no longer had any doubts about who they were now: a self-conscious community set apart from all the other nationalities that made up the USSR. They had been branded as traitors and thieves and outcasts, but knew themselves to be survivors. It is worth quoting the Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn about his impressions of the exiled Chechens during his own banishment to a Gulag work camp in Soviet Khazakhstan in the 1950s:

> *"There was one nation which would not give in, would not acquire the mental habits of submission—and not just individual rebels among them, but the whole nation to a man.*

These were the Chechens . . . I would say that of all the special settlers, the Chechens alone showed themselves unbroken in spirit. They had been treacherously snatched from their home, and from that day they believed in nothing . . . The Chechens never sought to please, to ingratiate themselves with the bosses; their attitude was always haughty and indeed openly hostile . . . And here is the extraordinary thing: Everyone was afraid of them. No one could stop them from living as they did. The regime which had ruled the land for thirty years could not force them to respect its laws."[3]

By the 1970s and 1980s, a new type of Chechen was emerging: Gone was the rustic and traditional peasant; in his place was the educated shepherd and the philosophical farmer, as well as the modern version of the traditional Chechen *abreg*, or noble bandit—now involved in a wide range of illegal, Chechen-network dealings across the span of the USSR. Banished from Soviet society by Stalin, the Chechens had created their own, which had all the characteristics of the "family" sort of structure one associates with the Mafia. In effect, they were becoming a fifth column deep within the Russian Federation and the USSR, aching for collective revenge for the horrors Stalin had visited upon them. As the octogenarian Chechan Mafia boss character Makhmud explains in Martin Cruz Smith's *Red Square*, the Russians (meaning the Soviet authorities) "deserve everything that happens to them. They deserve us."[4]

And then came the long summer of 1991 and the break-up of the USSR, followed by the extended Chechan-Russian showdown about the real meaning of "sovereignty" and "independence." The cast of major players and walk-on characters and rogues' gallery involved in the sustained debate and debacle is long and confusing. There was Gorbachev

---

3 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. 3, trans. Harry Willets (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 401–402.

4 Martin Cruz Smith, *Red Square* (New York: Random House/Ballantine Books, 1992), pg. 57.

appointee Doku Zavgaev, who had declared Chechnya independent (or sovereign), only to be removed in September 1991. There was Umar Avtorkhanov, a former police major from northern Chechnya who never acknowledged the declaration of independence and sovereignty as valid, and who subsequently became the point man for Russian money and arms sent to Chechnya to destabilize and then overturn the secessionist regime. Then there was Bislan Gantemirov, strongman from Chechnya's "second city" of Urus Martan, who first was appointed mayor of Grozny, then broke with the president to fight alongside Russian forces, only to be reappointed mayor by them, until he was removed on charges of embezzlement. Ruslan Labazarov was a released murderer who served as a presidential chief bodyguard until lending his gang to Ruslan Khasbulatov, the former Duma speaker until Yeltsin's bombing of the Russian Parliament in October 1993. In another category entirely were Shamil Basayev, the computer salesman-cum-volunteer guerilla in the Abkhaz war, who was to become the most celebrated (or notorious) field commander among scores of celebrated Chechen fighters, and Colonel Aslan Maskhadov, who resigned his position in the artillery corps of the Russian Army to return to Chechnya and build up a fighting force to defend the independence of the wayward state.

Then there was the person and personality of the mercurial and contradictory Chechen president, General Djohar Dudayev.

A child of the deportations of 1944, Dudayev returned to Chechnya with his family in 1957 and proceeded to embrace the Soviet version of affirmative action with zeal, enjoying an upwardly mobile career trajectory through the Soviet military—even if he had to conceal his nationality.[5] Rising to the level of Air Marshall in the Soviet Air Force with a wing of strategic nuclear bombers under his command, Dudayev had married an Estonian Russian and had had so little to do

5 Cf. Carlotta Gall and Thomas de Waal, *Chechnya: A Small Victorious War* (London: Macmillian/Pan, 1997), p. 83.

with his native land and language during the last three decades of the existence of the Soviet Union that many questioned his bona fides as a Chechen. Some suggest that Dudayev's reckless nationalism may in part have been based on an attempt to overcompensate for his lack of comfort in what might be referred to as traditional Chechen skin.

We first met in Istabul in April 1993, on the occasion of the funeral of Turkish President Turgut Özal. To show his respect and underline the fraternal relations between his tiny, secessionist country in the North Caucasus and the Turkish Republic, General Dudayev had come to join scores of world leaders at the state funeral to mark and mourn Özal's passing. The difference between his presence and that of the other political luminaries at the wake was that Dudayev had arrived illegally, piloting his own jet in and out of Russian airspace without deference to passport regime or Russian diplomatic protocol. The reason, he said, was that Chechnya was not then nor ever had been part of Russia.

"Come and watch how we make the Russian Bear tremble!" said the former Soviet Strategic Air Command General, inviting me to the self-styled Republic of Ichkeria, which is what the Chechens called their unrecognized state.

The occasion that provided itself for my own illegal flight into the Chechen capital was yet another presidential funeral, namely the last rites of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the deposed president of Georgia, who was to be interred in the garden of his residence-in-exile on February 24, 1994.

Although we had never met, Gamsakhurdia and I had a deeply personal connection. It was Zviad who had inadvertently introduced me to the complicated ethnic mess that was post-Soviet Georgia, and by extension and extrapolation, to the larger and more complicated ethnic mess of the post-Soviet Caucasus as a whole. In early 1992 I had been called upon to travel to the town of Sukhumi, capital of the western Georgian province of Abkhazia on the shores of the Black Sea, to find the just-putsched president and exclusively interview him about how it felt to be the first post-Soviet leader to be driven from power. Zviad's supporters blamed his demise on a deep, dark collusion between the Russian military and Mikhail Gorbachev's former Foreign

Minister and James Baker III's fly-fishing friend, Eduard Shevardnadze. Sadly, Zviad was not available to comment on any of this. He had not been hiding out in Sukhumi, Zugdidi, Poti or anywhere else in western Georgia. Rather, he had fled to Grozny and set up a government-in-exile there with the blessing of his host, Djohar Dudayev. And there he remained until September 1993, when an unholy alliance of Abkhaz separatists, backed by Chechen and other North Caucasian volunteers, Russian cossack freebooters, and rogue elements of the Russian military (such as the Air Force) drove Shevardnadze and the ragtag bunch of gunmen that tried to pass for an army from Sukhumi—a little episode many took to calling "Shevy's Last Stand."

Yes, it was a sad and confusing time, but on a personal and professional level very useful to me for the opportunity it provided to become acquainted with Caucasus-style chaos theory and to be introduced to my dear and lifetime friends, including a certain S. Lawrence Sheets.

As chaos and trauma descended on Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia decided the moment had come to return home, oust Shevardnadze and restore his own government to power. Sadly for Zviad, he overplayed his hand. Shevardnadze loyalists, now backed by Russian armor, ran Gamsakhurdia to the ground in the mountains of Svanetia, where he was either killed by supporters (some say by his wife), committed suicide, or died of some illness and lay buried in an unmarked grave. There was never an autopsy.

The Gamaskhurdia revolt (or attempted restoration) collapsed, and in an attempt to start the process of inter-Georgian reconciliation, Shevardnadze allowed Zviad's body to be exhumed and transported to Grozny for reburial in the garden of the villa that had served as Zviad's headquarters-in-exile. It seemed poetically appropriate for me to meet in death the man I had pursued but never met alive. I thus vowed to attend his state funeral in the Chechen capital, which would give me the opportunity to poke around town and make my own assessment of what was usually described as the "bandit" state of the Caucasus.

The problem was getting there. Since its declaration of independence in the fall of 1991, Chechnya had been a belligerent island in a

Russian sea, and the Russian Foreign Ministry did not issue visas to casual visitors because of a declared state of emergency in Chechnya. The one effort to reassert control over the breakaway state in December of 1991 had ended in an utter fiasco: A planeload of *Spesnatz* paratroopers had flown in, but were disarmed by the airport guards, put on buses and sent back to "mainland" Russia, their collective tail between their legs. After that, Moscow slapped a quasi-blockade around the renegade state. "Quasi" because it was in the interests of many in Moscow to maintain a black hole in the Russian economy, a sort of tax-free haven for commodities ranging from weapons to human beings.

My own approach vehicle was a blockade-busting Tupolov 154 death-trap jet, flying from Baku to Grozny on its way to Dubai via Istanbul. It was flying empty on the first leg of its journey to pick up a couple hundred Chechen "suitcase" businessmen on a shopping trip for cut-rate electronic goods in the Gulf, who would then flog their new Sony VCRs, television sets, and refrigerators in the Grozny market to middlemen who always seemed able to get such items to other markets in the farthest corners of the Russian Federation. With the aid of fifty dollars, the Tupolov blockade-buster became my private aircraft, at least on the Baku–Grozny leg. To this day, some people say I hijacked the plane, but that's just not true. Ask ace American photographer Stanley Greene or *Le Monde* correspondent Natalie Nougayrede, whom I invited along for the ride.

As the only passengers on board we enjoyed VIP treatment from the staff. In addition to as many warm bottles of green-tinted mineral water as we wanted, the cabin crew was kind enough to supply shots of vodka in brown plastic cups. Our takeoff was of course delayed, but this allowed us to inspect our aircraft.

We found it wanting. The ashtrays in the armrests, for example, had all been removed; so we flicked our cigarettes on the floor and ground the butts into the carpet, as had many others before us, judging by burn marks. I refrain from describing the condition of the toilets.

"This plane is in pretty good shape, compared to some I have flown

on these *biznessman* junkets to the Gulf," said the pilot, a former Soviet Air Force comrade of Dudayev's, who was named Othello, I believe. "Usually, the seats are stripped out to make room for refrigerators, and the passengers have to sit on the floor."

Finally, after some four hours on the ground we received clearance to fly. Acting on the general principle of violating as many laws as possible, we stood up for takeoff, a cigarette in one hand and shot of vodka in the other. Then, after an hour or so in the air, the T-154 began its descent through the leaden sky, the no-smoking sign clicked on, followed by the fasten-seat-belt warning. We three regarded neither. The flaps came down and then the wheels, and the pilot guided the plane into Grozny's Khankala airport for landing. The T-154 rumbled to a halt and Stanley nudged me in the ribs and pointed out the window. An airplane was parked not a wingspan from ours, although it was not going any place soon: it was another T-154, its back broken and the guts burnt out.

Last week's unreported crash landing? we wondered. Who knew . . .

The staircase was trundled out and we three passengers disembarked with the crew. No sooner were we on the ground than we were sprawled on our butts. There was a layer of ice everywhere, from the plane to the terminal and presumably all across the runway.

Welcome to Grozny. It was my first step in Chechnya, and it was slippery.

So was the next—namely, entering the country. The Khankale Airport lounge—to abuse the word—was filled with hard-eyed men and women in furry caps and great coats, clutching plastic bags filled with bottles of vodka and tins of caviar to trade for goods in the gleaming shopping-mall nirvana of Dubai, and all looked mean. Stanley and Natalie had Russian visas but I was, strictly speaking, an illegal alien and obliged to approach the customs man with deference and apprehension. The plan was to explain how President Dudayev himself had invited me to Chechnya, and that the officer should call the president and ask, if he doubted my word. . . .

But the official, squatting behind a cardboard box and stamping the papers of black-marketeer Chechens out of Russia, was uninterested

in my arrival, visa or not. When he had stamped out the last merchant, he just kicked the box aside and walked away. I had just entered Chechnya, a place famous for its disregard for the law.

I almost felt at home.

The Chechens were almost always associated with the concept of crime in the realms of the old Soviet Union. I had heard of this before, but barreling down the potholed, ice-coated highway from the airport to Grozny in a brand-new Jeep Cherokee with no license plates, the criminal connection took on new piquancy.

"Do you want a nuclear device? Women?" asked our driver, Emran, who was vaguely associated with the tourism agency that had hired the plane that had brought us to town.

"What about this car?" I playfully suggested, obliquely referring to a line of business the Chechens reputedly had a hammerlock on: supplying ex-Soviet motorists with used Mercedeses and other fancy, formerly forbidden cars, allegedly acquired in Poland or the former East Germany.

"For $13,500, cash, its yours," said Emran.

Har har har! We all laughed.

It was pretty funny, being offered a stolen car the moment you walked through customs, such as customs were in Chechnya.

"Yes, we are a nation of thieves, and we are a nation of fools," Emran continued, the smile slowly disappearing from his lips. "We never ask ourselves how is it possible that we are getting away with the larceny we are accused of conducting. How is it that you foreign visitors can come and go as you please? How is it that our president, a former security official in the USSR, is able to fly in his own airplane, with no regard to the official airspace and international flight regulations that pertain in Russia? Tell me, how?

"Look around you! Everything is going to hell. And this used to be a rich country—*rich!* Yes, we have new cars, but we have no roads. Yes, we are free to travel to Dubai to conduct suitcase trade with no duty, but we have no jobs! Tell me, what will become of us? When

will Moscow say 'enough' and flatten us all? *Soon!* And let me tell you this, too—it will not be the leaders of this country who will suffer, but us, the people who blindly supported them. No, my new friends, bad days are coming, dark days indeed."

I never saw Emran again, and have no idea what happened to him when the poop he predicted actually hit the proverbial fan. But in April 1995, when in Grozny, I sought out his travel agency: it was a heap of smashed bricks.

At the time, however, it was all a big joke. All the Western press seemed to be writing the same thing: The Chechens were the most "feared Mafia group in Russia," whose specialties included fencing, framing, money-changing, car theft, white slavery, bank fraud, blackmail, uranium smuggling, and, of course, murder and assassination.

Not that the Chechens did not leave themselves open to the tough-guy charge. On the contrary, almost all Chechens I met during that first journey seemed to delight in their national notoriety as genetic criminals. They seemed to equate it with freedom—possibly the freedom that comes of scorn. Senior officials in the government proudly assured me that one could buy anything "from a stiletto to a Stinger missile" in the local weapons bazaar. While I was unable to locate anyone with the heat-seeking rockets in their active inventories, everyone said they were available on demand. Other weapons were everywhere for sale. One young merchant, swinging hand grenades by the pins on his fingers like a pair of six-shooters, offered me the bombs at around three dollars each. Kalashnikovs were selling for around two hundred dollars a piece, extra clips optional. If I wanted to pick up an eight-wheel Soviet armored personnel carrier, that would run five thousand dollars, although the merchant did not have one currently in stock.

Elsewhere in the market scruffy characters in Astrakhan *papakhs* carrying fat wads of dubious looking one-hundred-dollar bills worked the percentage points in the alfresco money market. Here, vast stacks of electronic goods recently brought in from Dubai stood next to piles of turnips, both selling at a brisk pace; there, an elderly couple just back from Istanbul were laying out a collection of fancy lace under-

wear and chocolates on a rough table, and were immediately deluged by customers. A Mercedes SEL-600 pulled up disgorging a young man with a pile of Russian-language Qurans in one plastic suitcase and porno magazines in another. Russia may have slapped a currency and communications embargo on Chechnya, but it was a matter of indifference to everyone in the market. All were enjoying the benefits of having become citizens of the largest duty-free shop in the lands of the former USSR, or the new Russia, a state to which all said they did not belong.

In addition to their alleged criminal activities, the Chechens were also known for outlandish behavior especially designed to prove their fearlessness. My favorite story concerned how the Chechens play Russian roulette: Gather six pals at a table, remove a grenade from your coat pocket, pull the pin, and set it on a plate. The last man who dives under the table wins, as it were. I have no idea if that story has any basis in fact. But it was so good I used it in a file for *Business Week*. Others then picked it up from me and made it truth.

Yes, indeed. What was curious about most reports published on the Chechens was that they were all so similar—and usually "sourced" back to inherited wisdom floating around Moscow's insular diplomatic and intellectual community, which no one bothered to properly check out.

Take the stolen car business. It was an accepted fact that the Chechens ran that lucrative network, and if you doubted the allegation the evidence was riding around the streets of Grozny: scores of Mercedes 600s and Jeep Cherokees that had appeared from nowhere. *Reducto Ipso Fox News Factoid:* They were all stolen and smuggled into Chechnya, and *thus the Chechens ran the entire stolen-car network in the lands of the former USSR.*

It didn't take a Johnnie Cochran of O. J. Simpson fame to raise a couple of salient points at the mass trial in the court of public opinion: For example, *how did the alleged thieves manage to get their goods all the way from Western Europe (Germany or Austria, say, or even the Czech Republic) over a thousand miles of roads that crossed at least two and often three theoretically heavily patrolled border points without the direct collusion of local authorities, and no doubt even*

the tacit collusion of senior security officials in said countries, including Russia?

Then there was the business of the "air houses" that were cropping up all over Chechnya—the red brick structures, some quite large and certainly more pleasant than the standard Soviet-style five-story instant apartment slums that blight the Russian landscape from the Baltic Sea to the Bering Strait, were so-called because the money to build them had apparently descended on the owners tax-free from the ether (i.e., *Mafia money.*)

Perhaps there was an element of truth to this—but the argument was always expressed in the context of the Chechens *having no right* to build or renovate their homes in a style they saw fit and livable. To read some of the reporting on this aspect of Chechnya, one is left with the impression that the authors had a priori decided that the Chechens were guilty of the crime of trying to live like human beings. In all fairness to the Chechens, their critics should have applied the same yardstick about ethnic Russians trying to achieve greater creature comfort, too. *What right* did all the Mercedes drivers, dacha rebuilders, and new VCR owners in Moscow have to enjoy their new, post-Soviet prosperity? If one equated ostentation and crime, then everyone in Russian with money to spare and a propensity to spend it should have been sent off posthaste to a new and large *gulag* for economic crimes against the state, including most of the Yeltsin government.

This was no mere bum rap; it was a racist smear job, and one in which much of the Western media played along like ill-willed and mean-spirited buffoons.

The most egregious example of this tendency to mix conventional wisdom, cliché, and gallows humor of the prewar days was the case of the Ostayev brothers, Ruslan and Aslanbek, whose murders in early 1993 first shocked and then amused London society. The pair had shown up in England in mid-1992 as the special representatives of President Dudayev. Some say their mission was to establish contacts with Her Majesty's government; others say that the brothers were in the U.K. in order to underwrite the first issuing of a Chechen national currency; still others suggest that their real mission was to get to know

international arms merchants and initiate negotiations for several specific systems for which the Dudayev government anticipated future need. It is possible that the brothers were involved in all three of these projects simultaneously.

Whatever the case, the Ostayevs lived like kings. They purchased a large flat in a desirable area of town, left lavish tips at restaurants, and entertained several expensive prostitutes at the same time.

Sordid? Maybe. Uniquely evil? No.

One need not approve of the Ostayev lifestyle to recognize it for what it was: The brothers were only living like virtually all other "New Russian" businessmen on a roll. Their crime, or stupidity, was having the bad sense to hire an Armenian émigré as their translator, who then killed them and, with the help of a colleague from California, chopped up the Ostayevs. They got caught trying to haul the mincemeat to the trash can.

The two murderers were convicted of their confessed crime. The Armenian American subsequently committed suicide in prison, while the translator became so terrified of Chechen revenge that he asked for solitary confinement. This saved him, but not his family. Some six months after his trial, conviction, and imprisonment, a couple of swarthy gentlemen came knocking at the house of the translator's sister-in-law. Apparently they thought the woman who answered was his British wife. The name fit, anyway.

Bang-bang-bang!

And the concept of the blood vendetta was added to the list of deeds the Chechen Mafia indulged in on general principle, now playing on the international stage.

We met in the rattletrap elevator of the presidential building where I had gone to register with the Department of Information and News Reporting of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, and I was immediately impressed with his English and quick wit.

His name was Eduard Khatchoukaev, and his calling card announced him as being the "Chief of the Department of Foreign In-

vestment of the Chechen Republic"—that is, the point man assigned the task of attracting and evaluating foreign investors to a country with no foreign relations.

"You Western correspondents are idiots," snarled Eduard when I sort of chuckled at the discrepancy between title and task. "You show up in the lands of the former Soviet Union and try to impose your own terms of reference on us, when you do not even know the terms of reference in which we, former Soviets, think. You throw around terms like "democrat," "conservative," "reformer," and "hardliner" when they have either no meaning here or a completely different meaning than you understand. How can I have a real conversation with you? You ask me to explain highly specialized issues, and you take down notes and impressions in black and white. It is like asking me to explain what a Sony television is to my great grandfather. He may have been an intelligent man in his day, but he did not even know what electricity is. I explain the television to him. He nods and tries to imagine what I am depicting—and then goes home and tells his friends about a magic box, in front of which is a mirror, reflecting a kaleidoscope of colorful pictures. That is how you understand us."

It was, in many ways, the most enlightening conversation I have ever had in the lands of the former Soviet Union. Here was a batch of "Western" correspondents, myself among them, attempting to understand and then *report* on—in a thousand words or less—the bizarre but real phenomenon of the audaciously separatist, self-styled Chechnya Republic of Ichkeria within the context not only of the collapsed Soviet Union but also the chaotic and brand-new Russian Federation.

I wanted to press the point—at least to the extent that my meager brain could comprehend—but a gurgling noise outside interrupted further discourse.

"Sorry," said Eduard. "I have to attend the ceremony."

"You mean the Gamsakhurdia funeral," I corrected him. "But isn't that tomorrow?"

"Idiots, all idiots," sighed Eduard Khatchoukaev. "The funeral is indeed tomorrow. Today is the Day of Chechen Genocide."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The fiftieth anniversary of the Day Of Exile," Khatchoukaev sighed. "The day when Stalin tried to kill us all."

The elevator was stuck, so we descended from the fifth floor of the presidential building by the stairs—and discovered mayhem in the ice-covered streets.

HUNGA HUNGA HUNGA! came the noise, somewhere between the rumble of an overloaded truck creaking uphill and the first wave of a nuclear bomb exploding.

HUNGA HUNGA HUNGA! came the sound, nearer now, maybe human.

Then, turning the corner, I found the source: a wall of men, catapulting themselves down the street in a sort of Sufi dirge-cum-pogo-stick frenzy, and right at me. It required all the nerve I had to hold my ground before the human wave rolled over me. The wall of marching, jumping, and moaning men were led by a biblical-looking character sporting a skullcap and a white beard down to his navel. He screamed and howled and moaned while waving a stick above the penitents, demanding even more devotion. I could not understand a word.

HUNGA HUNGA HUNGA! the mass of men grunted, now standing in formation and waiting for the call to charge, *HUNGA HUNGA HUNGA!*

A helicopter whirred through the air, and from a distance came the sound of marching feet. Invisible speakers crackled to life and a martial ditty filled the air:

Da! da! di-Dah da Daaah! da! da! di-Dah da Di dah . . . !

The graybeards howled. Women wept. Kids, clinging to the frozen, leafless branches of ornamental trees, sobbed, losing their grip on the sapless twigs. Then the first line of crisply uniformed troops wheeled around a corner—and accompanied with a roar from the assembled crowd, more and more and more.

Our host, Soviet-era SAC General Djohar Dudayev, had just put his army on display. And now, with some two thousand men standing

slapdash at attention and five or ten times that number in the audience, it was time for his grand entrance.

The last time I had seen Dudayev, at Turgut Özal's funeral in Istanbul, he had been wearing a conservative business suit and his trademark fedora. But now, in the role of generalissimo, he came riding in atop a jeep, dressed in military *purdah*: leather trench coat with heavy epaulets, war bonnet with brim, and jackboots and kid-leather gloves. However nasty it sounds to say it, he looked like nothing so much as a bad copy of Charlie Chaplin's Little Dictator, toothbrush mustache included.

The Leader took a formal salute from the head of the armed forces, General Aslan Maskhadov, and mounted the review stand. Behind him, three flags flew at half-mast: the Chechen and Ingush banners both employing the same color mix of green, white and red, but in different patterns, and then the maroon and black Georgian flag, raised in honor of Zviad Gamsakhurdia. His widow, Manana, stood to Dudayev's right, supported by a small circle of mourners from Georgia. To Dudayev's left stood a gaggle of Muslim religious leaders and dignitaries, ranging from the mufti of the Crimean Tatars and the Imam of Bukhara in Uzbekistan, to the Sheikh of Islam for all Caucasus Muslims, Allahshukur Pashazade from Azerbaijan, who waved at me and smiled.

A bugle called for silence, and the ten thousand people gathered in the square were stilled. An invisible *muezzin* called out the Muslim creed, or *Fatiha*, and as one, twenty thousands hands turned palms up to heaven while ten thousand lips whispered the prayer, before stroking their faces with their hands and saying *Amen:*

Bismillah arRahman arRaheem
Alhumdillahi, Rab alAlameen . . .

"Allah ul Akbar!" someone wailed into the speaker system.

"ALLAH UL AKBAR!!" returned the throng in a deafening roar. "God is the Greatest!"

"Allah ul Akbar," said Djohar Dudayev, stepping up to a bank of microphones.

He waited for a moment of pious silence and then began to speak.

"Today is the Day of Shame, the Day of Death and Destruction, the day we can never forget and we will never forgive!" General Dudayev declared. "It is the day, fifty years ago, when the Center, under the demon Stalin, attempted to eradicate the Chechen nation. But through our faith in the Almighty we survived. God is truly Great! Through His grace we survived and thrived and returned to our ancestral lands, our holy lands!"

"Allah ul Akbar," came a wave of pious muttering from the mass of people.

"And with His aid and assistance we will never allow the events of 1944 to be repeated again! To this end, I have created an army—and every member of every household is a soldier, for now and ever more! *Allah ul Akbar!"*

"Allah ul Akbar!!"

"God is Great!"

"GOD IS THE GREATEST!!"

"Al Fatiha!"

Once more, an invisible *muezzin* called the faithful to recite the creed. Once again, men and women, young and old, civilians and military, raised their hands to heaven and then, as one, wiped their hands over their faces.

And then the parade began.

Da! da! di-Dah da Di daaah! da! da! da-Di da da Di!

General Dudayev raised his right hand to the brim of his cap in salute, and the phalanxes of soldiers snapped to attention, wheeled, and marched by the review stand, boots slapping in time on the icy street. First came the honor guard dressed in traditional Chechen garb, replete with long *kinjal* knives in silver sheaths. Then came the Special Forces in blue berets and camouflage uniforms, followed by commandos in black hoods. Finally, wheeling around a distant corner came blocks and blocks of men in combat green—the Chechen national army.

Da! da! di-Dah da Di daaah! da! da! da-Di da da Di!

First came the jeeps with their TOW missile launchers. Then rows

of artillery pieces, followed by a dozen multiple, antiinfantry GRAD missile-launching batteries. Then, with a rumble and an *oooh* and an *ahhh* from the crowd, a single T-72 battle tank was followed by a brace of T-54s, still impressive, even if forty years old. The real show-stopper, though, was the appearance of four older model surface-to-surface SCUD missiles, lumbering along on wagons pulled by farm trucks.

"Is he insane?" asked Stanley Greene, madly snapping pictures. "There is only one country those SCUDs can be pointed at—Russia! All four of them!"

The antique SCUD display was going to be a hard act to follow, but our host appeared to have something else up his sleeve. Then, while General Dudayev continued to hold his frozen salute, a troop of Chechen commandos burst out of a building flanking the parade ground, bowling over anyone in their path: Shamil Basayev and his Abkhazia Brigade. The commandos had been the sharp edge of the assault force that had conquered Sukhumi, and struck terror in the hearts of Eduard Shevardnadze and Georgian manhood. Here they had a chance to demonstrate their stuff in public for the home crowd, and performed an exhibition that started with a little jujitsu with knives and ended with the commandos smashing flaming bricks first with their bare hands and then with their heads.

Whatever else is said about Djohar Dudayev, I would like to add this right now: The man knew how to throw a party.

The last stop on the day's agenda was a fashion show of the newest styles for men and women from haberdashers in Istanbul, attended by President Dudayev (now dressed in civilian togs, including his trademark fedora) and his chief advisors, including Vice President (and Chechen nationalist theoretician) Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, who wore an Islamic-style beard and traditional *papakh* on his head. Both applauded merrily at the models strutting down the catwalk to martial ditties, showing off the new uniforms of the Chechen armed forces, including dress togs for the landlocked country's navy.

Yes—dress uniforms for the landlocked country's navy.

Ah, Chechnya—a chuckle every minute, and parade day in Grozny on February 23, 1994, was one of the better hoots I had come across.

But, on reflection, the marvelous parade was deeply sobering, troubling even.

At the top of the list of worries was the question of where all the weapons on display had come from. Presumably, the answer was that the hardware had been gleaned from late Soviet–early Russian garrisons in or near Chechnya, with Dudayev using a chunk of his oil-smuggling profits to buy his arsenal from deserters large and small. This was an old story in the recently collapsed Soviet space. Show me a press report about an arsenal gone up in flames inadvertently, and I'll show you an arsenal commander who just received a good chunk of change from local interests to destroy the nonevidence of a massive ripoff of Soviet military goods.

Still, I marveled at how Moscow could allow this tiny little piece of *Rossiya* to have its own armed forces. Any fool could see that this was not a joke but a challenge, the signal start of what would eventually become the bloodiest and most awful of all the conflicts that wracked the Caucasus during the 1990s, and one that unleashed forces that will take decades to tame, ranging from rude, crude racism on the side of the Russians to the new unholy alliance between Chechen nationalists and Islamic fundamentalist types financed by the fundamentalist demon of the late twentieth century, Osama bin Laden.

But that was later.

The Sufi *zikr*-parade and fashion show were over, but the audience was going nowhere. Despite the bitter cold, thousands of people remained on the streets. It was, after all, the fiftieth anniversary of The Day—and the first time the Chechens had held a public commemoration.

A group of two or three dozen deaf mutes formed a circle beneath a huge poster of the flag and national symbol, the alert wolf, signing to one another what I assumed to be stories from the *Vysl,* or Exile.

Here and there in the streets, dense knots of younger women gathered around old ladies in mohair scarves, who lectured the former on the litany of suffering and loss they had undergone in Central Asia. Then, near the empty pedestal where a statue to the Unknown (Soviet) Soldier had once stood, a lone man began to sing in a deep, resonant baritone. It was a dirge, and sung in Chechen, so I could not understand the verse. But the chorus or refrain was recited in high, Quranic Arabic, *La illah il Allah, wa Muhammad ar Rasul Allah.*

The English translation of the syllables, especially in the context of the lone old man singing, in no way does them justice: *There is no God but The God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of The God.*

And I was not the only one transfixed by the moment. In ones and twos, then in fives and tens, scores of people drifted toward the open space where the old man stood, picking up and then harmonizing with the refrain and chanting a multitonal background of purest sound as the dirge leader sang out his hymn to victims of fifty years before and to all Chechens who had ever lived and ever died.

The dirge leader began to stamp his feet, and the rhythm was picked up and passed around the circle now forty feet across and at least a dozen people deep. Then someone began to clap, and the sharp explosion of cold skin on skin soon created a percussive counterpoint to the ethereal chanting. On and on it went—a more splendid, strange, and sad song than I had ever heard. Both Stanley and myself were transfixed and almost reduced to tears by the sheer intensity of the spectacle, and we abandoned our professional tasks at some point and simply stood in the middle of the dirge circle, listening, learning, longing.

Finally, after an hour or more, we extracted ourselves from the dirge circle—and encountered a moment of panic. Both Stanley and I had inadvertently left what amounted to thousands of dollars in electronic equipment on the outskirts of the circle when we entered—and then promptly forgot about. But there was no need for concern. Some anonymous soul had removed our precious bags by about ten feet, placing them on a sheltered ledge near the pedestal, lest they be crushed by the crowd.

Nation of thieves, indeed.

Evening was coming on and there was still one more stop to make—the newly dedicated Memorial to the Chechen Genocide.

Located in a small park that was itself an ancient cemetery destroyed by Stalin's henchmen after the eviction of the Chechens in 1944. The monument to the estimated two hundred and fifty thousand victims who died in boxcars or of broken hearts in the wastelands of Central Asia was simple and moving. It consisted solely of a pair of hands, reaching upward to heaven, imploring God for aid that no man wished to give. A wall flanking the hands was engraved with the names of destroyed villages and settlements, with the number of missing and known dead from each engraved next to each place name. Next to that was a larger bas-relief with an inscription, written in the Latin-based script for "new" Chechen, that translated to *"Never Forget and Never Forgive—Never Again!"* In front of the hands stood a stone representation of the Quran, replete with carved ripples in the stone pages and even a green "cloth" page marker, also made of carved stone, on the beautiful early *surah*, or Quranic verse, known as *An Nas*, or "Mankind."

Awuzzu fi Rabb an Nas
Malik an Nass . . .
I seek refugee in the Lord of Man
The King of Man . . .

An elderly man stood in front of the stone Quran, and after he had completed his prayers, I approached him and asked him who he was and where he was from.

"Khuzurev, Vakha," he replied, from the town of Shatoi in the mountains to the south of the capital, and he was old enough to remember everything, *everything,* he said.

"I was ten years old that day," he said with a wistful smile.

The night of February 23, 1944, was cold, even for the people of the mountain town. As a result, Khuzurev had brought the sheep back

to their pen early. But there was a commotion in the village. All the men had been "invited" to attend meetings at the local *Sovyet,* or council hall building, celebrating Soviet Army Day and the rollback of the Nazis.

"My father, Muhammad, who was back in the village on leave from the front, joined the others, but with some misgiving," Vakha Khuzurev recalled. "It was the last time I saw him and most of the men his age group. I do not know if they killed him that night, or if he died en route to Central Asia, or if he was sent back to the front and killed, or if he survived either the war or the deportation but never managed to find his family."

As soon as the grown men had gathered at the *Sovyet,* American-made Studebaker military trucks pulled up. They were filled with security personnel who quickly surrounded the building and forced the men to board the transports.

"But some resisted," Vakha recalled. "Some fought back. Even though they were unarmed. Perhaps my father was one of them; I do not know. It was too dark to see."

As young Vakha watched in terror, the ringleaders of the resistance—or perhaps just men who were more easily seized because they did not resist at all—were herded out back of the *Sovyet* building. There they were forced to dig a pit in the frozen ground. Shots rang out. Men moaned and fell. There were more shots and more moans. Then silence.

"Then the soldiers brought out buckets of lime, and poured them into the pit." Khuzurev recalled. "I remember the sharp odor quite distinctly; it wafted from the courtyard toward our sheep pen where I was hiding, overpowering the odor of manure."

The nightmare had just begun. The soldiers then went about Shatoi making a house-to-house search, telling each family that they had one hour to pack, allowed only one bag.

"After that one hour, the soldiers returned and forced us aboard the American trucks. Then they drove us downmountain to Grozny and the railway where thousands of others, all in our same pathetic situation, were waiting to be loaded like cattle aboard boxcars.

"We were shipped east, that much we knew. By the time we arrived in central Kazakhstan, about a quarter of the people packed into our box car were already dead of cold, starvation, or the diseases spread by the corpses left among us. A brother and sister died. Others died later of no apparent cause. We called it the 'yearning disease.' "

The rest of Vakha's story could have been told by virtually every other Chechen of his age. The family, or what remained of it, was sent to a collective farm not far from the capital of Kazakhstan, Alma Ata. Other Chechen families were there, too. Over the next year, they slowly but surely recovered from their collective shock and psychosis and began making collective decisions. One was to institute a program of rebuilding the nation by having widowed women remarry as second, third, or fourth wives of selected men who had survived the ordeal. There was precedence for this: When Chechen manhood was decimated during the course of the fifty-year *Murid* wars of the mid-nineteenth century, Imam Shamil encouraged multiple marriage for men of character (as opposed to merely men of means) in order to increase the braver blood lines in the community, and make up for generational loss. This practice was sanctioned by the Quran: 'Take what your right hand can sustain,' spake God through the Prophet Muhammad after the early Muslim army had been routed at the Battle of Badr. Muslim losses were such that something had to be done to accommodate the sudden large number of widows and half-orphaned children of seventh-century Arabia then, and among the Chechens in their Central Asia Exile in the late 1940s.

"When it became clear that my father was no longer of this world, my mother was invited, through the agency of the elders, to remarry with a man from another village, whom she did not know. It did not matter. He became my new father, and the six children of their marriage my brothers and sisters," said Vakha. "Likewise my aunt, who had also lost her husband, entered a new marriage with another man who already had inherited two other wives. They had five new children."

And how many wives did Vakha have, I asked as delicately as possible.

"One," he replied. "The time when it was necessary to procreate simply to rebuild the community is over—at least for the time being."

The rest of Vakha's story reflected those of tens of thousands of other Chechens, exiled and officially forgotten in Central Asia. A community identity based on pain was central to their being, its remembrance the one thing that held them back from oblivion through assimilation.

"You see that writing on the wall?" Vakha Khuzurev asked me, indicating the Latin-script inscription behind the Raised Hands monument. "It says *'Never Forget—and Never Forgive.'* None of us ever will."

The rest of the weekend was dull, comparatively speaking. President Dudayev hosted a press conference and answered questions about his putative threat to explode a nuclear device in a Moscow subway if the Kremlin tried to impinge on Chechen independence in any way. The next day was the state funeral of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, with much wailing and gnashing of teeth and solemn vows of revenge by exiled Georgians against the KGB stooge Eduard Shevardnadze, the CIA flunky Boris Yeltsin, and the rest of the despicable, uncaring world, generally speaking for the Zviadists, life itself was a conspiracy.

Our host, Djohar Dudayev, had the final eulogy, extolling his friend and fellow president Zviad Gamsakhurdia as a "great son" of the Caucasus, whose example in life and exemplary death would stand as a model for all those seeking freedom from imperialism and the Russian yoke. Clumps of dirt were thrown on the coffin and my extraordinary introduction to the "rogue republic" in the North Caucasus was at an end.

"Djohar," chuckled Stanley. "The world is going to be a lot less colorful place without the Chechens. I give it six months before the tanks roll."

Stanley was off by three months.

In August 1994 there was a shootout between government security personnel and members of the well-armed Chechen "opposition."

In September Dudayev's forces retaliated and took out henchmen loyal to the "opposition" leader, Umar Avtorkhanov.

In October, a spate of trainjackings and other banditry attributed to the Chechens in the mainstream Russian media had the country up in arms.

Then, in November the "opposition" made a move on Grozny itself. Remarkably, the thugs were in possession of aircraft, which came roaring over the city, dropping bombs.

" 'Opposition?!' " cried Dudayev at a press conference on the eleventh floor of the presidential palace, as MIG-29 fighter-bombers screamed through the sky and strafed the city. "You want evidence of Russian involvement? Look out the window!"

The few journalists there, including my friend Lawrence Sheets, then of Reuters, tried their best to take notes while hiding under the furniture. Still, the Russians attempted to deny involvement—even when Dudayev's men captured dozens of young men in Russian uniforms in the aftermath of a tank blitz gone bad.

Finally, on December 31st the Russian Minister of Defense, Pavel Grachev, came clean.

"An action has begun in Chechnya to restore constitutional order," he blithely announced. "It should be completed within a matter of hours."

War, the expected one, had finally broken out in my patch. But I was thousands of miles away, back in the United States, unable to get an assignment to join the fray.

It was doubly maddening because I was obliged to watch the battle for Grozny unfold in thirty-second news bites on American television, crunched in between diet pill and Dodge commercials, a flashed reference to conflict in a strange, distant, and ultimately unfathomable place. The only thing I could do was wear my *papakh,* acquired in the Grozny bazaar the year before, and hope that it attracted sufficient interest for rank strangers to stop and ask where the hat was from, and thus allow me the opportunity to rant and proselytize.

Then I got the phone call. A low-budget offer from a small television agency in Philadelphia known as Video News International, that wanted to contract me out to ABC's *Nightline* to make a documentary on "the Chechen spirit." It would be a solo trip behind the lines that required an illegal entry into Russia at war.

I was back in the saddle again.

3

MASTERPIECE OF CONFUSION

She emerged from the evening-fog-mottled ditch by the side of the road, a lone woman dressed in a nightgown, waving at us while walking out into the middle of the highway.

"Slow down," I said from the back seat, tapping Isa on the shoulder. "That woman—"

"Don't worry about her," said Isa. "She's without intelligence."

"I beg your pardon?" I started to say—and just then the woman in the nightgown lurched toward our car, an insane grin stretched across her face from ear to ear.

"*AaaiiIIIEE!*" she screeched.

The driver swung the car to the left and into the far ditch, narrowly avoiding a collision with a stray cow before lurching back up to the right. We regained the road a moment later and turned on the headlights. They illuminated a nightmare landscape; a road that was lined by men and women, old and young, all dressed in rags, and shouting, cheering, and jeering. Behind them I could make out the shape of a long, official-looking two-story building. The front doors were open, as were the outside gates.

"Good God!" gasped Isa. "Someone has opened the cages at the insane asylum!"

There were lunatics literally all over the road.

"*HeyyyyyoooooUUU!*" cackled another patient, lunging at our vehicle with one hand extended while fondling himself with the other. He was dressed in a greatcoat, but naked underneath. Other members

of the audience seemed to be throwing things; possibly they were just waving.

"*Drive! Drive!*" barked Isa at our driver, cranking his head around to look out the back window as we roared away. I did the same—just in time to watch the next car, also running without lights behind us, narrowly avoid running over the wailing woman in the nightgown to the cheers (or jeers) of her peers gathered on the Shali–Grozny road.

That was only the most surreal of a series of encounters Isa and I had that first day in Chechnya at war in mid-February 1995. After crossing the Akchay River near Khazavyurt, that same morning we proceeded on foot across the mud and muck of early spring farmlands. Our destination was an oil derrick set on a small hill that defined the horizon for miles around. The derrick was idle, but a small force of Chechen volunteers had occupied several outlying buildings. Their self-assumed task was to defend the oil installation when the Russians attacked, as all were sure they would.

"I fight with the *kinjal,*" said the group leader, a man named Vakha, referring to the traditional Chechen close-combat weapon, a stubby, double-edged swordlike bayonet. "The reason for this is that I prefer slitting Russians throats to wasting ammunition."

I tried to act like an old hand at the relative aesthetics of killing in the traditional manner, but was quickly brought up short.

"You laugh," said Vakha. "But this is not a laughing matter. The real reason we kill with the knife is both for revenge and to send the Russians a message."

"I don't understand," I confessed.

"When we take prisoners, we take care of them in private homes and contact their mothers to come and take them away," he said. "You have seen this on television, so you know it is not a lie. What you have not seen is the state of our fighters who fall into Russian hands. They are beaten, bruised, and buggered. Such humiliations will stop, or we will make sure that no Russian prisoners are ever taken."

One of Vakha's men drew his *kinjal* and pried open a can of Soviet Army spam, sliced it into hash and threw the mess on a stove until it was cooked, or at least hot.

"Eat," said Vakha. He and his men would not partake, because of the Ramadan fast.

We left the guerrillas in midafternoon, and trudged back over the muddy fields to the main road. We hailed a car and soon began weaving our way westward over a series of highways, cutbacks, dirt paths, village lanes and tractor-gauged flats, toward the small city of Shali. Life seemed decidedly normal and the war far away. Kids played soccer and some baseball-like game in nearby fields, while in the towns and villages through which we passed commerce continued to thrive in lively roadside markets. Grozny, the central market for all of Chechnya, had effectively been destroyed—but the merchants had survived with their merchandise and had simply transferred their businesses elsewhere.

We stopped repeatedly to buy cigarettes and candy bars that we did not need, as an excuse to enter into conversation and check the rumor mill. Leaving each town or market, we would pick up a hitchhiker or two—soldiers on temporary furlough, an old man carrying a sack of potatoes, and even two women wearing lipstick and mink coats. Mixing philanthropy with intelligence gathering, Isa pumped each for any information they had about the roads ahead and behind. A thoroughly confusing jigsaw puzzle of go and no-go zones emerged, partially due to the activities of one Bislan Gantemirov, a former Dudayev guard who had turned into a Russian stooge and was said to be running the main "opposition" town of Urus Martan.

"Urus Martan is the main town controlled by the opposition," Isa explained. "Actually, it is controlled by Gantemirov, who is working with Avtorkhanov, who is very tight with the Russians, and especially the KGB. They used him to start this war by promising him control of Chechnya. It is men from his clan who go around and negotiate with village elders, promising them safety now and wealth when the war is over."

Gantemirov, Avtorkhanov, Labazanov, Zavgaev and even Khasbulatov—all Chechen men of influence who had turned into warlords and stooges for the Russians.

"Traitors," I pronounced judgment on them all.

"Yes, and no," said Isa carefully. "As I say, Chechnya is a very complex place. There are many people here who love their country and want independence, but hate Dudayev as much as they hate the Russians. They think he purposely brought the country to ruin."

"Why would he do that?"

"There is a story going around," said Isa with a half wink. "During the middle of the siege of Grozny, a black Volga pulled up to a Russian roadblock. The guard asked the driver for his papers and was shocked by whom he saw in the back seat—Djohar Dudayev! He reached for his gun, but found another hand restraining his. It was his commanding officer. 'But sir!' whispered the soldier. 'We have captured the leader of the Chechen bandit formations!' His commander slapped him across the face. 'Arrest a general in the Soviet Army?' he thundered. 'Raise the barricade, and salute!' "

"And?"

"And what? That's all! The Russians still think of Djohar as their man! *A Soviet general!* Hahaha!"

However far-fetched, the idea had a familiar ring: a "leader" sent from the Center to stoke the flames of *lumpen* nationalism that would lead to national disaster. Then the broken population would beg for the return of order that only the Kremlin could provide.

We arrived in Shali in the late afternoon, and it was there that one first apprehended the sounds, sights, and smells of war: the dull thud of the nightly artillery barrage on invisible Chechen positions to the north set me on edge, but everyone else around seemed as inured to it as a smoker oblivious to his own cough. Likewise, my eye was drawn to the horizon, where the gray haze of a winter evening darkened into a wide swath of black. Not quite funnel-shaped, the dark blotch of air reached upward and then leaned west.

"*Gorody*," said Isa flatly. *The city*—Grozny. There really wasn't much more to say.

We changed cars and continued westward via a more and more complex series of cutbacks that led us by the twin towns of Stari (old) and Novi (new) Atagi. The former had been bombed from the air while the latter had been spared, and I asked Isa why.

"The Russians are trying to negotiate with village elders into 'neutralizing' their towns," Isa explained. "If the elders keep out Dudayev's fighters, the Russians promise not to bomb them."

"And what do the fighters think of this?"

"It drives them crazy—but what can they do? If the elders say they have to leave, then they must. The *Iztarika* have spoken, you see. It is a matter of respect and the Law of the Mountains."

"But it also seems to be selling out."

"Yes, it is that, too," said Isa. "But what else can the elders do? Die for Dudayev out of general principle—even when he is unable to defend them?"

Indeed. Beyond resolving the question of secession from Russia, how were the Chechens going to sort out their own internal questions of split loyalties to different causes? How would the residents of the neighboring towns called New and Old Atagi be able to coexist?

Brain-drained from speaking nothing but Russian for three days, I began nodding off to sleep in the backseat. Isa's nonstop conversation with the driver, in Chechen, began transforming itself into surreal, nonsensical bits and fragments, and then whole phrases of a language I did not know, but imperfectly understood, a language, as it were, half-way between English and Arabic:

"*. . . And then she said the cat stared at the spit crank with the umbrella shaft loose.*" Isa was saying. "*Shakespeare and the truth on rosehips crap in the full front afternoon . . .*"[6]

Then I began to hallucinate, or thought I was: There was a woman standing in the middle of the road, dressed in white, and waving at us. A mad smile stretched across her face, as white and stony as alabaster. I pinched myself hard. But the woman was still there, and we were heading straight for her. That is when the driver swerved hard and I woke up to find myself driving through a bunch of lunatics on the loose.

---

6 Peter Fleming, brother of Ian, describes this same disconcerting audio phenomenon in *One's Own Company,* his book about wandering around in Manchuria and China in the mid-1930s.

I stayed awake after that, through all the detours and cutbacks, until, two hours later, we pulled up in front of a large, well-appointed semirural farmhouse.

"Where are we?" I asked Isa.

"My home," said Isa. "Urus Martan."

I had been hoodwinked, fooled—and probably kidnapped.

Urus Martan—*the center of the Opposition!*

It was the last place in Chechnya I wanted to be, and was tempted to try and bolt—but to where, to whom? Straight into the arms of Bislan Gantemirov's gunmen?

It was a good thing that I was too exhausted to react, because as word of Isa's homecoming spread, men started coming out of the woodwork to welcome him, and it rapidly became apparent that even if Urus Martan was known as an Opposition stronghold, anti-Russian sentiment was rife.

"We have never agreed to be part of Russia—not Czarist, Soviet, and certainly not the new 'democratic' federation led by Yeltsin," raged an elderly gentleman for whom everyone had stood as he entered the room. "Show us the document! Show us the signature!"

"Hear, hear!" echoed the assembly.

Then a tall, thin man with enormous bags under his eyes arrived at the door, kicking off his shoes before entering the room. He was one of Isa's nephews and had just come from Grozny with bad news. His brother Zaur Bek had been killed by a sniper that day. The room fell silent for a moment.

"How did it happen?" croaked Isa.

Zaur Bek had taken the Russians at their word that a cease-fire was in effect. It was the third Friday of Ramadan, and noon. Accordingly, he had gone to perform his mid-day prayers and was shot in the back as he ritually washed his feet.

"Praise be to God!" said Isa, lifting his palms toward heaven.

"There is no God but the God, and Muhammad is his Prophet!" whispered the rest of the assembled, joining Isa in prayer. Then everyone stroked their palms over their faces and sat back down to their tea.

"I am so happy for him!" said Isa, almost smiling. "Imagine that! To die a martyr in Ramadan, on Friday, and while preparing for prayer! There can be no better death!"

"Praise be to God," intoned the assembled.

The martyr would have been twenty-four years old in a month.

We rolled out of bed early the next morning, I packed my camera equipment into the trunk of a car provided for our use, and we traveled to the nearby town of Achkoi Martan for the funeral. The ceremony was simple, stark, and as compelling as it was long. In fact it lasted all day. Zaur Bek's father in the company of a local imam sat with other male members of the family, receiving visitors around a wood-stove set in the backyard of their large house. Each newcomer would stop abruptly at the threshold to the family's space; the family mourners would rise from their chairs; the imam would call out the word *Fatiha*, or Muslim Creed; all would turn their palms to heaven and recite the creed, ending it in the universally understood *Amen*. Then the visitor would walk across the threshold, extend one arm behind the grieving father's back while accepting the same in the peculiar half-embrace that was the Chechen handshake, pass his condolences in a few terse words, and then retire to the periphery. The next mourner would then approach the threshold, halt until the imam called out the *Fatiha*—and the process was repeated once again—and again, and again.

Sliding around the periphery among the mourners, I tried to get a picture of the young martyr by asking what the mourners felt about his passing. I did not get far.

"We are all more than happy to die like Zaur Bek," said his commanding officer. "Our motto is 'Independence or Death.' "

Zaur Bek's six brothers echoed that sentiment, swearing they were all ready to go, too. The elders in attendance were even more adamant.

"Let the blessed martyr be a symbol to all of what the Chechen spirit is all about!" crowed one toothless old man. "I call upon the youth here to witness that they will never, ever submit!"

"Praise God!" the youth responded.

"The body that was Zaur Bek returns to the dust, but he is us and we are him! We are his father and he is our brother and our son. Let us die by the grace of God in our time, the time that He declares!"

"Praise God!"

The sermon was interrupted by the arrival of several new mourners. While all set about their formal prayers, I took advantage of the moment to slip down the street and take a look at things free of Isas's company.

This was an error.

The reader will recall that my mission was to shoot a documentary on Chechnya for television. To do so, I needed lots and lots of video footage—and not just combat scenes. I needed men and women in the streets, buildings, markets, rivers, forests, mountains—in a word, life—in order to emphasize death. I needed images, and the central market place of Achkoi Martan seemed a logical place to start. No sooner had I set down my tripod and focused on a pair of shawl-draped matrons selling turnips and cigarettes than I was verbally assaulted.

"Hey!" screamed one woman, dropping negotiations with a customer and wheeling on me. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Taking some pictures," I began to explain.

"Pictures of what! Pictures that show how good things are here in Chechnya?"

"Why aren't you in Grozny taking pictures of the *real* war!?"

"Erase that tape, or we will take it!"

"Let's see your permission!"

Instantly, I found myself being trundled over to the *prefektura*, or government building in downtown Achkoi Martan by an angry knot of elderly ladies from the market.

"Take him!" snarled one of my captors, as the ladies forced me on a couple of guards.

"Spy!" they scowled, and roughly shoved me inside.

My interrogator was a bull of a man draped in bandoleers who

described himself as the KGB officer in charge of my case. He began by apologizing for using the old acronym for the Soviet Secret Service from the days of the USSR, explaining that the government he now represented had not yet come up with a suitable alternative. Then he asked me who I was and where I was from, and requested documentation that would prove my claims. I gave him my passport, as well as a couple of less-official but supportive documents, like my Azerbaijani and Turkish press cards.

"These seem to be in order," admitted my inquisitor. "But where are your visa, press card, and special presidential permit to work in the zone of conflict?"

A *visa* to enter Chechnya? *A press card? A presidential permit?* There was only one place where the authorities were sticky about such things—*Russia*. A wave of confusion rolled over me. Had I misheard Isa? Maybe it was not *Urus* Martan that was the center of the pro-Russia, anti-Dudayev opposition, but *Achkoi* Martan? Lacking the documents, there seemed nothing else to do but tell a version of the truth now and make room for lies later.

"I do not have any of those papers," I confessed.

"Please explain why you do not."

"Well, it all began like this," I said. "This morning, waking up at Urus Martan. . . ."

"Urus Martan? That is the center of the Opposition!"

"I don't know; it was where I spent the night after coming in from Azerbaijan."

"You came in through Dagestan from Azerbaijan illegally?"

"I was assured by your foreign minister that it would be okay."

"Which foreign minister!"

"That of the Chechen Republic, Mr. Shamsettin Yusuf."

"Why, if you are indeed a friend of Shamsettin, did you need to sneak into Chechnya from Dagestan? And why, then, were you staying in that center of treason, Urus Martan?"

"Because that is where I was brought by my guide!"

"Your guide? And who was he?"

Indeed. Who was Isa? Position or Opposition?

Suddenly the door burst open—and confusion now made a complete masterpiece.

"There you are!" cried Isa. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

"Is this . . . your guide?" the KGB man asked me, much more polite than before.

"Yes, of course I am his guide!" shouted Isa. "I brought him over from Azerbaijan. He is a Turkish American, or something like that. Now stop this nonsense and let him go!"

"Yes, yes, immediately, Isa Bek," replied the KGB man with a hint of subservience in his voice. "I am personally sorry for any and all confusion that has been caused."

"Let's go," said Isa, grabbing my passport and other documents from the table.

"Hold on, not so quickly!"

It was the commander, now taking a chair opposite mine.

"You speak *Turki*?" he asked with a wide smile. "Before the war, I did *bizness* in Istanbul—it is a fine city. I would like to go back after the war is over."

"Look me up if you do."

"Well, give me your address."

It was time to take advantage of the moment. After writing out my coordinates in the City of the Sultans, I asked a favor of my new friends: a formal pass to work in the area.

"Nothing easier," said the commander, and scribbled a message in my notebook.

> *The bearer of this pass is entitled to move freely, with the exception of forward military positions, throughout the county of Achkoi Martan in the Chechen Republic, in order to complete his journalistic duties, Signed—*

"Wait," I said, struck by genius. I dug around in my wallet and found an old ID card, snipped off the picture, and attached it to my new pass with two strips of electrician's tape. The commander then

signed his name over it. The only thing lacking was an embossed stamp and lamination. I was good to go.

The ladies who had performed the citizens' arrest were filled with remorse as Isa and I walked back across the rickety bridge from the *prefektura* to the market area, and invited me to shoot as much video as I wanted. I declined.

"I don't understand you," said Isa, as he sat down to a meat-and-potatoes meal at his grieving sister's house. "First you get in a fight with those ladies because you were trying to take their picture, and then when you have permission to do so, you don't want to!"

I tried to explain the ethical problem of using posed material, as well as the concept of spontaneity—and was surprised when Isa seemed to understand.

"Look," he said, after slurping down a bowl of broth. "I understand what you are trying to do. You want to make a program. But you can't do it helter-skelter on the street. Everyone's paranoid and ready to shoot suspected spies on sight!"

"The old ladies, anyway."

"Others, too, believe me," said Isa. "What we need is a long-term base of operations, and I think I know the perfect place. It's about a half hour down the road. My family has a house there. One of my brothers stays in it, and we can too. But I should warn you that it is a small town. It may not be as interesting as Achkoi or Urus Martan, and certainly not as exciting, war-wise, as Grozny, or even Shali. But for the short term, until we get our feet on the ground, it is a perfect place."

"What's it called?"

"Samashki."

4

SAMASHKI: THE PLACE OF DEER

No car. Isa hit me up for five hundred dollars for expenses in the smuggle job; God knows how much more will eventually be due. Then we waited for another vehicle to go to this place called Sharmalsheikh or Shamalsi or something. It's a dump and I wonder why the fuck I am here. Am I kidnapped and do not know it? My flak jacket and power supply got left in Isa's sister's house in that other town, she being the mother of the recently martyred Zaur and the town being whatever the hell they call it—one of the many "martans" around here anyway. Lesson learned: Never, ever leave anything anywhere, again! When I went back to collect my kit, I found some drunk fighting with people in the street. Action? asks camera-eye I. But then Isa steps in and forbids me to film the event. "Why not?" asks I. "Security," says he. What the fuck is going on here? Back at his place, or his sister's, the new car to transport us to Sharmalsheikh (with payment from me) turns out to be that of Isa's brother, Musa. Surprise, surprise! At least any kidnapping is a family affair. So we drive the thirty kilometers or so through several checkpoints manned by kids with loose looking guns until we cross some muddy creek that the sign declares to be the Assa River and enter the S—or Sh—town (whatever it is called) and turn down a mud road to the left into a mud road to the right and another mud path to the left to pull up in front of some nondescript place with a mud front yard filled with chickens and turkey, the latter squatting in the lower branches of the courtyard's pathetic trees. Then another brother, Muhammad,

emerges and waves salutations, or something. No sooner are we inside the place than Isa informs me that driver brother Musa and he are going back to the funeral of their sister's son in that other place called Something Martan. I just got conned into forking out five hundred bucks to some guy who plucks up the dough and drives off leaving me with his half-idiot brother who keeps hand grenades on the kitchen table like salt and pepper shakers, but lives nowhere near the front and looks nothing like any soldier I ever saw. What the hell have I got myself involved in?

That graph, dated February 18, 1995, was my first response to Samashki—*Samashk*, as the Chechens call the town, meaning "the place of deer." My "Sharmalsheikh" is apparently a distortion inspired by the Egyptian Red Sea resort town I once stayed in, famous for diving and windsurfing.

Samashki was not a tourist town. It was my new dungeon, with a new minder—Isa's brother Muhammad. To the extent he would allow me to see anything at all outside the house, what I saw was not much more than an overgrown, Soviet-style urban center of a collectivized agricultural zone. "Unprepossessing" was way too kind.

The High Street, as it were, was a stretch of asphalt so plastered with sludge that it did not even seem to be paved. It meandered through town like a weak spine, with smaller and muddier roads shooting off like ribs, leading to and through uniformly gray and drab rows of one- and two-story farmhouses, set cheek-to-jowl along the muddy lanes. A couple of gray, unfinished red brick and cement block apartment buildings broke up the visual monotony. Yes, Samashki was a dump, and I was not happy to be there.

Nor did it appear to be of any significance in the war. Muhammad mentioned something about a short battle that had taken place a few weeks before, when a column of Russian soldiers had decided to drive through town in search of vodka.

Vodka!

"There was an agreement with the elders that Samashki would stay

neutral if the Russians would just stay away," Muhammad related. "But a group of thirsty lads were unable to restrain themselves, and drove their armor down the main road. . . ."

It was almost as if Muhammad were chiding children for some amusing quality or behavioral trait. *Those darn Ruskies!*

Others were less amused by the liquor raid. A group of residents attacked the armored personnel carriers with shotguns and pistols to drive them away.

"It was funny for awhile," said Muhammad. "But then the Russians started firing back blindly from their machines, and it wasn't funny anymore."

Shattered windows, exterior and interior walls raked by heavy machine-gun fire—and then the entire town (or at least a lot more people than the first assault group) descended on the column and literally tore it apart.

"Some of the lads threw blankets over the view-portals of the tanks," said Muhammad, almost wistfully. "The Russians crashed into each other or drove off the road, and that is when we went in and got 'em."

The results of the action were scattered around Samashki like so many new relics of war. Here were the blown-off turrets of the standard Soviet-style armored personnel carriers, known as BMPs and BTRs, stripped of their mounted machine guns, leaning crazily on edge in a parking lot, the body and the engine nowhere to be seen. There, a small battle tank with an anti-mine plough attached to the front, completely burnt out and stranded where it was stopped, wedged between two houses down a muddy lane.

Take on an armored column with shotguns and bottles filled with gasoline? It was difficult to imagine—and even more difficult attempting to understand why the Russians, after having effectively pacified Samashki through negotiations, had thrown away the loyalty of the town on the basis of needing another drink.

From the area of the battle, Muhammad and I continued on through the muddy streets of the town to the market. It consisted of six or seven (maybe it was a dozen) tacked-together stalls that sold L&M

cigarettes, unwashed vegetables (mostly wild garlic greens), and Snickers bars. Perhaps the mohair shawls and socks being woven by the stoic women running said establishments were also on sale; I did not ask. I could not ask. As my personal minder in Isa's absence, Muhammad consistently prevented me from making any contact with anyone. And he had forced me to leave my camera at home for reason of "security."

"Folks here do not like foreigners," he said. "Most think they are spies. Are you?"

"Ask your brother Isa, if he ever returns," I shot back. "He brought me here."

"There are many people here who wonder about Isa, too."

Great, Isa's own brother does not trust him . . . and certainly not me.

Where the hell was I? What the hell was I doing?

Making matters worse was Muhammad, or rather, his heavily accented Russian and tendency to babble on about subjects *just* inside my range of comprehension.

"Where are you from, really?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, my brother Isa *girrt,* said you were a Turk or from Turkey, *girrt,* and you do wear that skull cap that makes you look like an Uzbek, but your eyes are blue and your moustache is blonde or red and too long over the lip to be a Believer in the True Faith."

"Actually, I am an American, from the state of Montana who lives in Istanbul and Baku, at least part of the time."

"A friend of mine *girrt* that there was this American, *girrt,* who was a spy, *girrt,* CIA. *Girrt* that the spy spoke perfect Russian, had memorized Marx and had even learned to dress and eat like we do, *girrt.* So they parachuted him into the middle of Siberia, and he landed and stashed his military stuff in a hole, *girrt,* and then made his way into town. *Girrt* everyone: "Ho! Mister CIA!" And the agent, *girrt,* was confused. *Girrt* "haven't I learned your language to perfection?" *Girrt* "don't I dress like you? *Girrt* can't I recite Marx like a commissar? *Girrt* how did you know?" *Girrt* everyone: "You are a Negro."

Peals of laughter, followed by a hacking cough.

"You get it?" chortled Muhammad. "*Girrt:* 'You are a Negro!' *Hahahaha!*"

What I eventually got was that Muhammad had not been clearing his throat with each *girrt,* but saying "*govariit,*" as in "he said or says" in the sense of "you know what I mean." The second thing that I understood was that Muhammad apparently believed I was some sort of fake-Muslim spy.

After a bachelor-style Ramadan *iftar,* or evening breakfast, of boiled garlic stems, potatoes fried in animal fat, and stewed tomatoes, Muhammad started chain-smoking some execrable brand of Soviet-style cigarette and suggested we get serious.

"Let's play some chess," suggested Muhammad, by which he really meant checkers. There being nothing much better to do, and my brain reeling from having spoken (or thought in) nothing but Russian for the past few days, I agreed and allowed the numbing stupidity of the game to dictate its terms. Hopefully, the third or fourth loss would allow me to curl up and collapse and ponder how to get out of this tedious town and stultifying situation in which I found myself.

"Oh!" chuckled Muhammad. "You left yourself open for a double take here. . . . (and after another move) . . . and a triple there!"

He was collecting the pieces and positioning them for the next round when the lights went out and the first bombs began to fall. The shelling was distant but audible, then palpable. A thin scream followed by a thud; then the windowpanes would shudder.

We were getting bombed.

Action!

I grabbed my camera and tripod and lurched toward the door.

"What are you doing?" gasped Muhammad.

"I have to work," I shouted back over my shoulder.

"Isa said you were not to leave the compound without me!" shouted Muhammad.

"Then follow," I snapped. The last thing I wanted was to return to the miniature living-room and be asphyxiated by bad cigarette smoke,

discourse in a rambling Russian that left my brain gasping for breath, and face the prospect of playing checkers with the village idiot savant.

Flash, thud, shudder, a missile streaked directly overhead and exploded, I was sure, somewhere nearby.

"That shell landed five kilometers away!"

It was Muhammad, pulling on his mud shoes and coat. I was already lifting the bar to the gate to free myself from his domain and was soon in the street, which would be better described as a darkened village lane. Aside from a few candles reflecting and distorting through neighborhood windows, there was no light at all, and progress through the tractor-and-truck-gouged lanes was tough. No light at all, save for the distant flash of the explosions of artillery shells falling on some distant site, and the beam of the flashlight on my head, as I tried to determine where I was going.

Out, away—anywhere!

"*Stoi!*" cried a voice, and I froze on command. "Stop!"

I was looking down the barrel of a double-barrel shotgun in the hands of some under-aged village guard tasked with guarding shadows.

"He's just a maybe-Turkish, maybe-American, maybe-something spy, only here because my brother Isa brought him!"

It was Muhammad, now at my side and panting heavily. Actually, I can only paraphrase what he said, as he was speaking Chechen and the only words I understood were "Turk," "American," and "Isa," although the context of the conversation made the likely dialogue sufficiently clear.

"Hmmmph," said the gunman in the shadows. And then in Russian, "*Davai!*"

I had just been released, and Muhammad begged me to return to the safety and security of his abode.

"Isa told me, *girrt,* not to let you out of my sight and not to allow you to wander around aimlessly with your camera and get yourself in trouble," he pleaded.

"Then go home; I am okay."

"You do not understand!" hissed Muhammad. "Isa is your guard! And because I am his brother and he is not here, I am your guard! This is the Law of the Mountains!"

Our confrontational conversation had the potential to turn ugly.

Then it began to rain or sleet or something, and with a flash of insight that bordered on epiphany, I very suddenly understood the situation. I was an illegal alien standing in a dank, dark village lane in an unfriendly little town in a country at war without a phone or friend in the world, and absolutely nowhere to go. I was furious, outraged, impotent.

Isa was sitting at the kitchen table when Muhammad and I returned, listlessly playing checkers with some nameless character.

"Doktor Teymur," said Isa. "Do you like our town?"

I tried to think up ways to express what I really was thinking and feeling, but thought it best to stick to my standard response.

"*Da,*" I replied.

Isa laughed and returned to the game.

I wanted to punch him but thought it best to just go to bed.

Where the hell was I?

PART TWO



5

BELEAGUERED GUEST

Morning. What hour? Ducks and chickens cackle. I open the door to the mud yard and discover all the turkeys sitting in the branches of the garden trees. Cowboy coffee, and I take these notes. Isa shaving by the gas oven that serves as a stove. How do they still have gas here, electricity? If I were the Ruskies (or Moscow) I would have cut off every last item of state-sponsored subsidies. But such is not the case. Gas and electricity flow, as does water—albeit that resource is only available at the pump. Literally. Isa and Muhammad's joint has a bathroom replete with sink and shitter, but it does not work, because there is nothing like central plumbing. Middle-class dreams, yes—suburban piping, no. That means every house has got an outhouse. Isa's, at least, is remarkably clean. I suspect most are in these parts—that is, as clean as an outhouse might be expected to be. Certainly, compared to other outhouses I have had the occasion to inspect, the Chechen WC is spic-and-span. Far enough from the house not to make direct olfactory intrusion, it is still close enough so as not to be dismissed or forgotten—and thus is kept clean. This is in keeping with other aspects of housekeeping. Specifically, the mud- and shit- and filth-clogged boots I deposited at the doorstep last night upon entering Isa's abode were almost spit-polished clean when I woke up in the middle of the night to 'inspect' the alfresco WC, and appeared in the same state this morning, despite my nocturnal sludge through the mud garden to take a piss. It was then that I noticed the turkeys in the trees. (Mid-February 1995 diary entry)

Isa disappeared again that next morning before I could have a word with him about moving on. Muhammad tossed kernels of corn to the poultry in the yard. With him thus distracted, I decided to slip out with my camera and shoot some generic B-roll footage with a focus on the 'battle zone,' meaning the shot-up houses and abandoned tank turrets that I had been shown the day before. At least it felt like work. I sallied forth and shot frames of shattered windows and doors and morose-looking people cleaning up shattered brick and broken chairs and sofas, and I asked folks how they felt about having their homes wholly or partially destroyed by Russian bombs. Rotten, said most.

All in all, it was all pretty weak brew compared to what was going on in Grozny a mere twenty miles away.

Meanwhile, the human manifestation of that fight was everywhere apparent, consisting of a long line of refugees moving down the main street through town. People were crammed eight or ten to the four-seat Soviet-style Fiat sedans, roofs half crushed by excess household weight. The refugees also traveled in trucks, buses, and even hay-wagons towed by tractors, the densely packed carriages bearing mothers, children, and the elderly. All wore stoic expressions, and not one shed a single tear.

The refugees' destination was the town of Slepsovski, a burg of about five thousand people located about thirty kilometers from Samashki down the road toward Chechnya's "cousin" minirepublic of Ingushetia. The Ingush had elected to remain inside the Russian Federation when Chechnya had gone its own way. Its farm-town capital, Nazran, and second city and airfield, Sernovodsk, was where many of my journalistic colleagues were now based, as well as humanitarian organizations administering the growing tide of refugees washing up in that safe haven. Without a visa for the Russian Federation—much less official press permission to be in the area of conflict, the dubious charms, comforts, companionship, and, most important, communication capabilities of Ingushetia remained off-limits for me.

But then I saw a car coming the other way, traveling in the direction of Grozny, and with a piece of paper pasted to the window with PRESS written on it.

Colleagues? It was my ticket out of Samashki or Sharmalsheiki or whatever they called this dump, and I stepped out into the road to wave down the car, hoping that the people inside might recognize me as a foreigner despite my *papakh* and generic cold-weather gear. The car was slowing down to see what I wanted when I felt a meaty hand on my shoulder, forcing me to turn around.

"Kto ti!" demanded a huge bear of a man, sporting a beard so long and white he looked like nothing so much as Santa Claus with bandoliers. Flanking him were a pair of identical twins, similarly festooned with weapons and wearing identically suspicious physiognomies. "Who are you!"

I muttered something about being a foreign correspondent and Santa demanded my papers. As I helplessly watched the press car drive on, I handed Santa my new "press pass."

"These papers are issued by Avtorkhanov!" growled my most recent captor, referring to the most notorious pro-Russian, anti-Dudayev militia leader. Then he flagged down another car heading in the opposite direction of the refugee stream and forced me in, directing the driver down the road toward Achkoi Martan and the same government building and government office where I had been interrogated the day before.

"Back to see us again, Mister Istanbul?" chortled the man who had issued me the makeshift press pass for the region. "Comrade Ali," he continued, referring to Santa. "Why are you abandoning your post to waste our time with an issue we have already dealt with?"

Commander Ali sputtered something in Chechen, no doubt in reference to the need to double check and be ever vigilant. The truth, it appeared, was that he was illiterate, and had not been able to read the signature on my papers.

"Dismissed!" said the security man, and Commander Ali and I returned to Samashki.

"God damn it!" I cursed. "Another completely wasted day!"

"What did you say?" asked a smiling Santa, who now regarded us as the best of friends.

Indeed. I had been coughing up English to express my outrage, and there were not a lot of folks around to understand.

Isa was not so much incensed at my rearrest and release as he was worried that I had disappeared into Grozny. Or worse—that I had been arrested by the Russians after stumbling over a checkpoint.

"They are torturing all the young men they get their hands on!" he said.

"How do you know?"

"One of my cousins told me," said Isa. "He just escaped from a filtration point."

"I want to meet him," I said, insisting that Isa take me to meet the man.

"Why do you have to talk to him? I just told you what happened."

"Isa—*I am trying to make a film!*"

No more rumors, no more secondhand stories. I needed facts on tape.

Reluctantly, he agreed, and following the evening meal of fried potatoes, pickles, and tea, we set out for the cousin's house.

I remember traveling with headlights out, the open fields along the roads we traveled lit by distant, multicolored flares. Eventually, we arrived at a typical Chechen farm—a roomy house partially hidden behind a courtyard wall with dogs and chickens and geese in the yard. Isa knocked on the door and gave the half-embrace handshake to a young man of perhaps thirty. He was introduced to me as the cousin, a man named Vakha.

Isa got straight to the point: The foreign journalist wanted to hear about Vakha's experiences under detention. And more. The foreign journalist needed to have it all on film, as evidence of Russian war crimes and atrocities against civilians.

"Okay," said Vakha.

He began to clinically relate how he had been walking down the road minding his own business in between tending the sheep and planting the potatoes when he happened across a Russian checkpoint in the disputed Slepsovski zone and found himself detained along with a dozen other Chechen youth.

"They beat us all as a matter of course," Vakha related dispassion-

ately. "Then they packed us into a truck like we were sheep and sent us down the road to Mozdok."

There is little doubt in my mind where Bertoldt Brecht got the name of the judge in his classic play about the Judgment of Solomon, *Caucasian Chalk Circle.* It was from a map of the Caucasus. But the difference in resonance between Mazdak, the stern but fair Biblical King, and Mozdok, the main Russian military base in the region, could not have been greater. It was a place that sent shivers up the spines not only of Chechens, normally so indifferent to the concept of suffering, but international human rights groups whose representatives repeatedly tried to gain access to the base, only to be turned away.

Mozdok, breathed Vakha. That is where things started to get nasty.

"They pulled us out of the truck and forced us to run through a double line of soldiers, who spit and kicked and hit us with truncheons. They aimed for the kidneys. Feel."

He pulled up his shirt and guided my hand to feel the bumps and bruises on his back.

"Then they walked—actually stomped—on those who fell; happily, I was not of their number. I heard gunshots. They say there were summary executions, but I did not see such myself. Perhaps they were just playing with their weapons."

The interrogators did not play around when using other methods, however.

"They bound me to a chair, locking my hands on a table, and then applied electric shocks to my fingers," Vakha related, showing with one hand how pincers were applied to the other. "Then came . . . I am embarrassed to say this . . ."

"Go on," said Isa.

". . . then came the application of electrical shocks to the area of sex, the genitals."

"How . . ." I asked slowly. "How did you get out?"

"There was an angel," Vakha said softly. "Not a real angel, of course. But a foreigner. A foreign woman. They were taking us from one place to another, showing us off. I do not know. But, as we walked, this woman from the Washington Red Cross was there and as I passed her

she whispered, Run, run—they are going to kill you all!' So I whispered her message to the others as the Russians were herding us toward a helicopter, and I said to myself, 'They are going to throw us off.' Others had heard and spoke of the Russians taking four cars and pulling people apart, attaching ropes to each limb. I have to say I was so frightened that I decided that it was indeed time to run for my life."[7]

Vakha and a small group broke lines, vaulted the security fence, hijacking a bus from Mozdok back to Ingushetia, and then to the safety of war-ravaged Chechnya to nurse their wounds and plot their revenge.

We drove back to Samashki, again without lights, the road again periodically illuminated by distant flares. Isa plunked a tape into the car's cassette player, and the dirge music silenced any thought of conversation. We did not talk; there was too much to think about: electrodes, cattle-prods, helicopters . . .

Then someone was shouting from outside the car.

"*Stoi!*" they screamed. "Stop!"

Isa hit the breaks and the car skidded to a slow halt in the middle of an icy bridge over what I recognized as being the Assa River on the outskirts of Samashki. Lost in the mystical dirge music on the scratchy car speakers, we had just breached another checkpoint. Whether Russian or Chechen was almost a matter of indifference by now. I was getting so very tired of checkpoints. Isa felt the same way I did.

"What a mistake to know you, what a mistake to help you," he muttered under his breath, and in Russian, so that I could understand.

"*Bumaga,*" demanded the man at my window, and I pulled out my controversial press pass from Achkoi Martan, hoping it was the right flavor.

"You will follow us," said the apparent unit commander.

---

7 There is no such thing as the Washington Red Cross, and I wondered who Vakha's angel might have been. Rachel Danbar from Human Rights Watch?

Sandwiched between two other vehicles of armed men, we set off from the checkpoint on the bridge and into the labyrinthine muddy lanes of Samashki, eventually stopping in front of an extended brick wall boasting a massive iron gate with a double door for vehicle entry and a single for pedestrians.

"Wait here," said the gunman, entering the compound. Then the steel door designed for human beings (as opposed to the larger door designed for machines) creaked open. I hoisted myself out of the car and walked through the steel gate to face whatever music awaited, preparing my line in as good Russian as I could muster. "Sir, I am sorry for having violated the security perimeter of your nearly surrounded town. As a completely independent and detached observer of the horrible war in your unrecognized republic I was merely attempting to document the brutality of the Russian campaign and the spirit of the . . ." That was the English version anyway.

Then I was inside the courtyard and a dog was yapping at my heel. At the far end, near the steps to the house, stood a stocky man with a Kalashnikov in his hands.

"Sir," I began. "I am a correspondent and . . ."

"So you are the foreigner I have been hearing about," said the commander.

"Yes, I am he, and I must apologize for any and all inconveniences that my arrival . . ."

"I have yet to interrogate a suspect in my courtyard," said the commander, with a chuckle. "Take off your shoes and enter my home."

I did so, as did Isa.

"These are my friends," said the commander, indicating a knot of five or six men squatting in the bare-as-bones, kitchen-loading belt-machine-gun shells.

"*Marsh vogil,*" they said, blinking up from their task. "Welcome."

A young woman busied herself making tea over the stove, while an elderly couple sat, silent and disapproving, in the far corner.

"So who are you?" asked the commander.

"Here are my papers," I said, handing over my new press pass for inspection.

"So, what sort of pictures have you been taking?" the commander asked.

I started to explain what I had been recording, but realized that I was describing material that amounted to generic visual junk.

A man walking from a shot-up house to a shot-up outhouse; another man standing in a shot-up house framed by a shot-up window frame. Chickens cluck-running in front of the turret of a tank. My host and guide Isa pontificating about Russian–Chechen relations in anecdotal form about something so profound and important that it took him ten minutes to say "and we must be free." Commander Santa Ali Claus saying much the same thing but looking better in beard and bandolier. The best stuff I had recorded was torture victim Vakha—and even if the content was good, I knew I had shot it all in bad light.

Yes, I could share a detailed shot list with the commander. If he did not believe me when I detailed said shot list, he could take a look at the (limited) material, and erase it all if it pleased him. There was nothing I had shot so far that I could not lose.

"I do not need to see any more pictures of bombed buildings or refugees," said the commander. "And to speak frankly, there is nothing in this community to conceal, from you or the KGB. We are farmers, and only defending our homes."

A farmer defending his home.

With a jolt, I understood that the man standing in front of me was exactly the sort of vessel I needed to explain the essence and nature of the Chechen spirit—and I had known him for all of half a minute. But how to broach this subject without getting laughed out of the room? The idea of asking the commander to allow me to tag along with him and his men seemed so utterly ridiculous that it bordered on the criminal. Anyone who truly exemplified the Chechen spirit would likewise have better things to do than burden himself with a stumblebum solo cameraman. The only type of individual who would agree to be my subject was precisely the type of person I did not want.

"Have a chair," said the commander, sort of suggesting that the formal interrogation that had never really begun was already over.

"I'm starving, and so are my boys."

It was, after all, a Ramadan evening—and none of the men in the room (with the exception of myself) had had a drop to drink or a bite to eat all day.

The commander broke his fast by wetting the little finger of his right hand with his tongue, and then dipping it in a bowl of salt. Dabbing it on his tongue, he then drank a glass of water. The half dozen hard-eyed men in the room did the same. For someone who had lived in the Muslim world for almost twenty years and who had seen many an *iftar* (or Ramadan breakfast), this was all very strange. While drinking water was normal, ending the daily fast with *salt* was almost like ending it with chewing on an onion.

Meanwhile, the womenfolk brought out pickled tomatoes, boiled beef soup, and bread. The commander commanded, and I joined his unit squatting on the floor, slurping through two bowls of beef bouillon before cutting the fat on my lips with hot tea.

"Better get down in the cellar," said my host and captor after a pleasant belch. "Ivan will be starting his symphony in about ten or fifteen minutes."

I did not at first understand.

Symphony?

"Bombs," he said, helpfully. "They start at exactly nine every night, and it is now a quarter to the hour."

I was being sent to the basement with the women and children.

It was too humiliating for words.

"I would rather stay here with you and your men," I blurted.

An awkward silence descended, and the commander narrowed his eyes.

"I do not understand."

"I told you my mission was to make a film about the Chechen spirit."

"Yes . . ."

"I need someone to embody that—spirit," I said, picking my way around words. "I want to do a portrait of you and your group of—warriors. But to do so, I need your cooperation—so I can capture moments on camera."

Silence. Utter silence, save for a radio voice in the adjacent room spewing out Moscow propaganda about events in the war that day.

"I see," he said, taking a sip of tea. "You want to build a career on this experience."

"No, not exactly," I hastened to say. "It is just that an American audience needs a—"

"We do not care what the Americans need or do not need," said the commander, cutting me off. "We have only one question: *What is in this for us?*"

I could have lied and said that the impact of my program being seen by millions of American viewers would lead to such immediate and visceral understanding of the present situation that the public would demand of the world's sole remaining superpower to threaten Moscow with nuclear blitz if the Russian military did not immediately desist from all actions in Chechnya, and just go home. I could have lied and said "five hundred bucks a piece, for everyone, once I get that expense through the bean counters at ABC." I could have fallen back on the need for "historical accuracy" or "freedom of reporting" or a variety of other press-related clichés. I knew that all such reasons would fail, because what the commander was asking concerned the value his co-operation with me might have for Chechnya.

"I do not know," I replied.

"Hmmm," said the commander.

And then the sky began to fall.

BoomBoomBoom

It was nine o'clock, I guess, and the first of the incoming rockets had started to hit the outskirts of the town. My interview or interrogation, such as it was, was over.

"Podval!" barked the commander, "Basement!"

He was already in his camouflage jacket and out the door with his five or six men behind him, leaving Isa and me to join the women and children huddling among the pickle jars in the cellar.

"Look at me!" cried one woman, demanding I focus my lens on her despite the bad light. "I am a teacher, a human being—but here I am, reduced to huddling among the garlic and tomatoes! *Look at me!!*"

How much bombing was there?

I don't know.

Everything that happened in Samashki eventually became relative. What seemed like a tremendous nocturnal bombardment at the time was probably nothing more than a few shells lobbed over the town. The earth shuddered and crept with each incoming blast, and then, almost as suddenly as it had begun, the shelling was over and the embarrassment began. Murmurs shifted around the basement sanctuary, and then a decision to send some brave soul upstairs to check the scene in the nontroglodyte world. That world was declared safe, *safe!*

As people emerged from the basement, the intensity of the moment was lost with the fresh air, and everyone seemed to feel just a little bit ridiculous for having gone down to the cellar in the first place. At least I felt that way, oscillating between utter terror and near embarrassment for having been afraid.

"Let's go," said Isa, and we trudged through the mud back to his house, listening to distant gunfire from the forest.

I slept with my glasses on, although I was obliged to leave my boots by the door.

6 CONTACT

I am hijacking an aircraft carrier, careful to conceal my identity and the fact that mine is really an inside job. I will keep the stuff I know the value of and already own, such as sleeping bags, sleeping pads, knives, and mess kits, but destroy everything else, because I do not know what they are worth. I am getting ready to scuttle the ship when somebody grabs me by the collar to shake some sense back into me and tell me to get up and go.

"They are shelling again! We have to go to Martan!"

The screech and boom of renewed incoming rounds had somehow become integrated into a dream, but now I was very much awake and very much interested in what Muhammad was saying. It did not really make much difference whether he meant we had to evacuate ourselves to Achkoi or Urus Martan. It was just time to go, and get out of this place called Samashki that seemed to be getting bombed long-distance every day just because some locals had denied some Russian soldiers a good, old-fashioned drunk. I scraped my kit together fast and made for the door, scattering a convey of tame turkeys on my way. When we got to the main road, it was awash with terrified humanity, with people much more frightened now during random daylight bombing than during the on-the-hour barrage of the night.

"Where's Isa?" I panted.

"He left at dawn for Martan," said Muhammad. "We have to get there, now!"

Muhammad waved down a passing car that was already crammed

full of women, children, and graybeards, and tried to push me in. But something stuck, or maybe something snapped. I could not just flee like that. I had seen too many refugees before. Doctors, lawyers, greengrocers, tradesfolk, all grappling with one another to be first out and away, reduced to aggressive beggary by their plight. That my foreignness put me in another category made me more determined to wait until that last woman and child had been removed before I cut and ran.

There were other factors, too. Commander Ali and his identical twin sons were observing the shuttle to safety from their cement bunker and seemed to sneer at (but not stop) the sudden exodus from town.

"Let's go!" wailed Muhammad.

"Skora," I replied. "Soon."

Then a jet screamed over and everyone on the road dove for the muddy ditches, even if the aircraft was merely terrorizing and not actually bombing the column of would-be refugees. Picking myself up from the mud, I ditched Muhammad and shuffled over to Commander Ali's bunker.

"What's happening?" I demanded.

"They are bombing the forest," came the even reply.

"What are you going to do?"

"Wait until they come in and fight like men."

I waited with Commander Ali and his men, filming women and children boarding buses and trailers pulled by tractors. Refugees, refugees, trundling off in both directions. It was so sad, and I wanted nothing to do with it. I wanted action—and Commander Ali and his men were not providing any of that.

Perhaps that other commander who had semiarrested me the night before might provide some, I thought. I ran over the road, hunched down for reasons I cannot possibly explain now. Everyone else was standing.

Remarkably, I was able to locate the commander's house, not so much due to my uncanny ability to remember the urban details through the fear filter of the night before, as due to the fact that I recognized the older woman from the kitchen, now squatting outside.

She was shucking dried cornhusks with her apparent husband, the older man, looking on. The contrast with the relative chaos of the main street some two blocks away was extraordinary.

"As-salam aleikum," I saluted the stoic, elderly man, and he sort of jerked his head in the direction of one of the green metal doors that defined the outside perimeter of all the houses along that particular muddy stretch of street.

The commander was standing in the courtyard, helping one of his men lift a heavy machine gun into a small cart pulled by a donkey and cover it with hay.

"Good morning!" said the commander as if welcoming me to tea. "Still here?"

"I couldn't cut and run like that," I blurted out. "I am here to work."

"Work?" chuckled the commander. "We are going to work, so just follow us."

Just like that.

I thought it best to introduce myself formally, and asked the commander for his name.

"Hussein," he said.

I would like to believe myself to be in pretty good shape. While I do not jog, I hunt and track deer, ski, windsurf, and ride a mountain bike with vigor. Friends and foes alike are amazed at the spectacle of my full-body-weight inverted push-ups. But at the end of some five or six hours of stumbling after Hussein as he made his daily inspection tour around the periphery of Samashki, I was wringing wet with sweat and more exhausted than, say, after dragging an elk hindquarter up and over and back down the forests on the south face of the Crazy Mountains of central Montana.

Part of the problem was weight: The camera kit I was lugging around weighed perhaps twenty pounds or so, with the flak jacket and shock plates adding another thirty. But it would have been difficult keeping up with Hussein had my burden been reduced to blue jeans, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes. We were up and over barrier fences and

clambering up rickety ladders to the shattered second floors of houses that would never be completed, stopping to chat and say hello to a hidden knot of gunmen with sniper rifles perched in the attic. We waded through muddy cow pastures oozing with goo to discover a line of incredibly narrow slit trenches occupied by half a dozen fifteen-year-old volunteers. Their task was to sit out the day and night waiting for a tank assault and fend off same with plastic bottles filled with kerosene. We doubled back to the town periphery to check on the point position on a secondary road—the farmhouse of an elderly couple and their son Alikhan, who allegedly knocked out two APCs during the original pitched battle over vodka by pin-point shooting at some metallic Achilles' heel in the enemy's war-wagon armor plating. Alikhan's slingshot weapon was a pretty basic if high-powered hunting rifle, perhaps the Russian version of a Remington 30.06 picked up from a pawnshop. The barrel and stock were clamped together with blue electrician's tape.

"You have to aim just so," he explained to me on camera. "Then it explodes."

"Then it explodes!" echoed his mother, pleased as punch, following her son around the kitchen with an apronfull of what must have been armor-piercing shells.

Another farmhouse HQ, occupied by a group of perhaps ten or fifteen men, ranging in age between fifteen and fifty.

"Allah ul-Akhbar!" shouted Hussein at our approach. "God is the Greatest!"

"Allah ul-Akbar!" replied two sentries, putting down their guns.

"This American correspondent is making a film about the Chechen spirit," Hussein explained to the assembled. "I am giving him free range to the front."

I shot videotape of scruffy men on guard duty, kids cleaning their guns, and even several testimonials to bravery and devotion, including some character reciting a poem by the nineteenth-century Russian poet Lermontov about Chechen bravery and devotion. I shot tape of the same men planting and replanting mines in a field across which Hussein anticipated a possible Russian armor attack. Tromping around in

the mud with the men was unnerving, to say the least, since the locations of the mine field (the mines themselves purchased from the enemy in exchange for vodka and cash) was only marked in individual memory, and the removal of and relocation of the devices seemed casual in the extreme. The queerest moment came just before sunset, when, in a drizzling rain, Commander Hussein pulled his four-ton *Kamaz* truck into a naked field, threw out a chain attached to the tailgate, and instructed two of his men to attach the chain to some object hidden beneath a patch of scattered, moldy hay. The truck lurched forward, and out of the ground rolled an octagonal object that was as large as a desk. It was, I realized with just a little shock, horror, and ignorant, knee-jerk fear, the explosive warhead of a surface-to-surface missile, or SCUD.

"If detonated properly, this thing will send an entire armored column into the sky!" chortled Hussein, as he and his five men pushed the monster up a set of thick boards into the back of the truck. In fading light, I filmed them doing so. Then there was a momentary pause, and the warhead began to reassert its command of gravity in the face of human frailty, and started to roll back down the ramp.

"Toms!" shouted Hussein, urgently, mispronouncing my first name.

If there are moments when the never-touch-a-weapon-on-either-side rule taught to prospective war correspondents is to be violated, perhaps this was mine. I dropped my camera in the mud and threw my shoulders and legs and back into the task at hand, helping roll the megamissile mine back up the ramp and on to the back of the truck.

"My, you are a strong brute!" roared Hussein as we bounced down the pitted, muddy Samashki perimeter. "Who knows what would have happened if you had not been there!"

The heretofore sour and sullen shepherd introduced to me as Xamid cackled in approval of this assessment, and clapped me on the back. The tall, lanky guy named Shirvani smiled for the first time. The man I thought was the commander's brother passed me a cigarette, while the doe-eyed kid I had started calling "the kid" kept his eyes downturned and his thoughts to himself, if he had any at age fifteen. Or, perhaps his thoughts mirrored mine, and mine were focused on one

thing alone: that we did not run back over our own handiwork in the darkened fields on the way back to the Ramadan evening breakfast of pickles, potatoes, and bouillon broth that we knew awaited us after our successful mining endeavor.

Was I slipping over some unspoken line? Or just becoming "cuddled"?

Cocks crowed. Turkeys gobbled. Dogs barked. Brothers snored.

And then a heavy diesel truck engine roared, a horn sounded a sustained blast and a now-familiar voice shouted from beyond the courtyard's metal door.

"Mishawu Tomas? Ha! Tzigawu!"

It was Hussein, my new friend and, I guess, partner or guide taking advantage of some lull in the action (or nonaction), come to collect me for a little tour of outlying districts he thought I should see. I held off long enough to get a cup of coffee down my non-Muslim hatch, grab my camera kit, and pull myself up in the cab of Hussein's rig, a four-ton *Kamaz* truck painted military green.

"Tomas!" shouted Hussein over the motor roar. "Remember that power station and mill I told you about yesterday?"

I didn't but said I did.

"We are going there, now," shouted my host while releasing the clutch.

We soon were bouncing down a deeply pitted road beyond the bridge and checkpoint, on the way to Achkoi Martan. The truck had such bad suspension that the frequent blows to my head could kill me if a Russian attack helicopter didn't blast us first. There was no guarantee that the latter would not happen. The Russian forces made a bit of a game out of arbitrarily blasting cars and trucks on all Chechen roads, and Hussein's four-ton machine certainly looked like a target to me. Actually, we were no longer even on a road, but a twin path of tread marks leading through sparse trees. Were we in the wild garlic forest that was bombed daily, or some other grove? Had a decision been taken to dispatch this overcurious observer, me, who now knew

too much, or what? What was I doing there? How long can one live with casual paranoia before it kills you?

Another downshift through a puddle, maybe a creek, that splashed dirty water on the shattered windshield of the Kamaz. A left, a right, another left beneath more trees with branches scratching against metal and glass in a way I would not let trees touch my beat-up old Ford in Montana. Then we stopped by a big pit, both the sides and interior overgrown with weeds.

"When I came back from Kazakhstan, I was looking for property around here," said Hussein, climbing down from the driver's side. "I had heard about this place—lovely ground, trees, water to build a small mill. My mind was set! Then this is what I found."

I jumped out of the truck and fiddled with my camera kit, testing the microphone and attaching the tripod.

"Look!" said a voice in the headset that was coming from nowhere in sight. It was Hussein, already deep inside the unnatural pit, clambering down the far side, feeling, touching, tenderly fondling pieces of rough masonry extending at flat angles far down below. Flagstones. Natural building blocks.

Then I got it. The flagstones were actually tombstones. Chechen tombstones used as an easy quarry after Hussein's ancestors were bundled off to Central Asia.

"Veedish?" breathed Hussein, back up on level ground after having bounded out of the pit, and solemnly, lovingly stroking a new stack of cut stone that passed as a regular wall leading to a sluice gate. *"Veedish*—do you see?"

The perfect farm, a place replete with a miniature hydroelectric plant and pond was built using the gravestones of his ancestors as building blocks.

"I remember when we first came back, we kids would sneak out to this place. It was already in ruins then; maybe it was never completed," recalled Hussein. "And there was a metal wheel associated with the generator—ah, here it is!—and we would spin the wheel and get it going as fast as we could and then dare each other to take a leap and seize the edge and *sppiinnnnn!*"

Hussein spun the groaning metal wheel, and I recalled doing a similar stunt in a grade school playground back home.

"Yes, we were kids. Kids!" breathed Hussein. "How could we know we were playing on the graves of our forefathers, laughing? And I remembered this place, and when I came back I had my mind set on owning it, developing it, because the remarkable thing was that no one else seemed to want it! So then I came back with my heart filled with dreams and memories, and someone had to explain why no Chechen farmer would ever, could ever homestead here. And that is when I began to understand. *Really* understand. There is no difference in time or space between the Czar's cannons against Shamil in 1854, the Bolsheviks seducing us to fight against the Whites in 1918, or Stalin deporting us in 1944, or Yeltsin rolling his tanks over our tombstones today. *Every fifty years,* the Russians attempt to eradicate us, because we have *never* submitted. And they will never succeed."

We trundled back to town in a silence enforced by the motor roar, picking up a couple of groups of forest youth on our way back and depositing them at the Assa River bridge checkpoint for guard duty. A knot of frowning elders in their *papakhs* and formless greatcoats stood to the side, stamping their feet in the cold and muttering darkly. Hussein leaned out the window and called over one of the armed men in the blockade house, exchanged some words in Chechen and then turned to me to explain.

"Ivan is closing the loop," he said with a frown. The elders had been on their way to a *perigavor,* or contact meeting with the invisible Russians down the road, but the meeting had been canceled due to a helicopter attack on several village women collecting wild garlic in a nearby forest.

More ominous was the very fact that the elders had called for the contact meeting at all. It was designed, Hussein explained, to neutralize the town.

"This is not just a war of independence, pitting Djohar against Boris, or even the Chechens against the Russians," he said. "It is also a conflict about control and the nature of Chechen society. It is about rich and poor, believers and nonbelievers—and I do not mean anything

religious by my remarks. Mark my words, whatever the result of the current conflict, the one that comes after it will be much worse, because it will be one that pits Chechen against Chechen, and we are the most remorseless people in the world."

And arguably innovative, as proven by the next stop on our itinerary. This was the courtyard of a blacksmith shop owned by a man named Alkhazur. My presence led to a certain amount of consternation among the other armed men loitering around. A quick discussion in Chechen ensued, but I could follow none of it. Voices were raised, but Hussein had the last word.

Then I found out why my camera caused concern. I was inside the local arsenal. Someone was firing up a welding torch, and in front of my eyes the lowly blacksmith's shop was converted into a weapons repair and creation depot. A heavy machine gun ripped from a dead armored personnel carrier was now under the torch, the barrel straightened and firefight damage addressed. Then Alkhazur removed the rods from a broken-down tractor in the yard and welded together a mobile platform for the gun, replete with swivel action and a basic shield. Within half an hour Hussein and his men had acquired an antiaircraft gun to ward off helicopters.

We dumped the truck back at headquarters and proceeded on foot on another round of visits to some slit trenches and machine gun nests on the north side of town, and then ambled over to the Samashki cemetery.

"Look around! Look! This is the cemetery of our elders, our brothers and sons!" said Hussein, picking up a piece of tombstone broken off by a random Russian bullet and placing it atop the marker. "The last time Ivan attempted to destroy us, back in 1944, he took every last stone to build that mill I showed you before, grave-robbing from this solemn place in order to erase all memory that we ever lived here."

Zzzinggg! Zzzinggg! And then the retort of a gun somewhere in the hills west of town. We were getting sniped at in the cemetery. I instinctively ducked behind a larger tombstone, but not Hussein. He marched on, seemingly oblivious to the danger. When I finally caught up with

him, he was finishing the Muslim creed of faith, the *Fatiha*, and wiping his hands over his face.

"Here is the Chechen spirit," he quietly breathed.

I looked at the hand-painted name on the simple tombstone. The birth and death dates suggested it belonged to a ten-year-old who had died almost exactly two years before.

"My son," said Hussein, without further explanation. "It is why we are here. We will not let Ivan plow under the graves of our people, ever again."

Then I noticed the day and month of birth. Hussein's son had been born on the day of mourning on which Chechens commemorate their Day of Genocide of 1944. He had never been allowed to celebrate a single birthday.

7 DOG OF WAR

I am starting to feel I have almost taken the Samashki story as far as it can go without getting bombed, meaning really *bombed—and that is what I am waiting for. And that is sick. I am standing on rooftops with camera on standby, stinking of bated garlic breath, waiting for some shell to fall close enough that I get a good, solid "bang" but hopefully far enough away that I don't die in the process. Just the people who have been looking after and feeding me and washing my boots after a hard day's slog through the mud. Jesus Christ. I am worse than the usual casual voyeur of the death and destruction of strangers. I actively want the death and destruction of my friends because if it does not happen I do not have "a story."* (Diary entry, early March 1995)

I had planned my sojourn to Chechnya to coincide with Genocide Commemoration Day of February 23–24 because I was sure it would make good television. Either the Chechens would launch a series of revenge attacks on Russian positions or the Russians would make preemptive strikes against Chechen positions that the Russian would assume were getting readying for symbolic attacks. The main point was someone would attack someone else, and that meant good television, if I could only be in the right place at the right time. That had been my plan, anyway.

But February 23–24 passed without major incident, as did the days and then weeks that followed, with my tagging along with Hussein or other members of his group around the streets of Samashki, or, once

the sun set, my setting up my camera atop the apartment building *Drudzhba* (Friendship) in anticipation of night bombing.

It was a cold, nasty experience that was also a waste of precious battery life. I kept the camera on standby as opposed to off in order to preserve juice, hitting "on" whenever a roll of artillery erupted in the black distance—but it was always too late for the camera to catch anything useful or useable, such as a huge and distant two-second explosion. Even if I could react to the incoming *ssschreeeeech!* and catch the *visual* explosion on the edge of town, it never matched the *audio* aspect of incoming destruction.

The first serious daylight soundings of Samashki's defenses, meanwhile, caught my camera cold. Literally. Thanks to my nocturnal vigil on the town's rooftops, not one of the dozen or so battery units I had brought to fire the camera had any juice left—and the battery charger that connected to a car cigarette lighter refused to work. Alkhazur, the blacksmith, was of no help, nor several other men identified as electricians. My last chance seemed to be a local beekeeper, a man who allegedly dabbled in bomb-making on the side. Directed to his house, I explained my problem. The beekeeper took the charger in hand, unscrewed the mount and stared at the circuitry.

"Hungry?" he asked, and suggested I sit down.

The table was soon set with tea, bread, the standard pickles and some rather good fried chicken, as well as a bowl of honey. For a moment, I was afraid the man was going to smear some of that over the dysfunctional unit—nothing else seemed to work—when he reached for a bottle of vodka, poured a small shot over the charger, and began scrubbing it with a toothbrush. Satisfied, he then set the charger near the gas stove.

"I don't think we want to melt it," I said.

"Don't worry," came the reply.

I was lifting a spoonful of honey to my mouth when suddenly the world rocked and roared and a huge cloud of smoke bellowed up and over the bramble forest and the forward lines. Instantly, I was on my feet and about to dash in the direction of the blast, now echoing with

the rasp of machine-gun fire on full automatic. Hussein's men, from what I could tell.

"Sit down," said the electrician, pouring tea. "There is no sense in your going anywhere until that thing dries."

He had a point. Aside from the purest form of war voyeurism (or unless I planned on picking up a gun), without a functional camera I had no business in the zone. So I sipped the tea and waited. The battle seemed to be being fought in the next muddy street.

"*Terplenia,*" said the bee man. "Patience."

After another cigarette he inspected the charger, screwed the mount back together, and beckoned me toward a car. Its battery was dead. We pushed it down a short slope and it started, and I could only hope that the cigarette lighter in the dashboard still worked. It did. As soon as we plugged it in, the first of the five green charge light indicators on the battery began to blink. In itself, this meant only that the car lighter worked, not that the battery was collecting and *holding* a charge. Another cigarette, and the second indicator began to blink, the first now a steady green glow. I stripped off the battery and stuck it on the camera, attaching a second battery to the charger. Then I tried to turn on the camera. With a beautiful *click* and *whirr* the device lit up. I hit the play button, and it began to record.

"Barkal, bolshoi barkal!" I nearly crowed for joy, running off to war again.

Well, almost. I still had to collect a minimum charge to make any activity worthwhile. So we smoked another cigarette while waiting for the second indicator to start flashing green. Then I begged the beekeeper to drive me as close to the front as he could safely go. I would save time (and, carrying the flak jacket and camera gear), energy—and also allow the battery to continue to charge. I figured I had about ten minutes of juice when we ditched the car and started working our way through shattered farm houses, ditches, and trees toward the front; the beekeeper had decided to come along, too.

We took a look at the lay of the land from the second story of one of three large, new, but abandoned houses on the extreme edge of town, which were often used as sniper nests. The forest obscured any

view of the battleground, but smack-dab in front of me I could see the cause of all the commotion: an armored train, periodically spitting fire and lead toward the forest.

An armored train?

We scampered down the makeshift stairway to the ground floor, across an exposed field (thanks to the cover of several cows), and into the bramble forest. After several minutes, a sentry called out to us in Chechen to halt and identify ourselves.

"Allah ul Akbar," we called back the password. "God is the Greatest."

The youths were apparently guarding the flank. On and on we ran, taking protective gullies when there was one, and hunching low when there wasn't, until finally we ran into a familiar form: Shirvani, sitting beneath a tree, having a smoke. I wanted to embrace him.

"Toms!" he chortled. "You missed all the fun."

At that precise moment a helicopter came swooping over us at tree level and everyone dove for cover. My dive landed me in a deep thicket of thorn, and I emerged a wounded man: In addition to various minor nicks and cuts and penetrations, a pencil-size needle, about as big as a cigarette butt on one end and as sharp as a pin on the other, had jammed its way through the pad of my left-hand thumb, and was sticking out the other side. The funny thing was that it was not all that painful. The reason for that was that I could not feel it at all. Or move the thumb. I discovered that fact when I attempted to pick up the camera. It dropped straight back down to the ground.

There was no time to reflect on my new onehandedness. The crack and blast of a duel on the far side of the thorn bush ridge beckoned. I crept up the ridge until I could see Hussein, some fifty yards in front of me.

"Toms!" he called, casual as could be. "Come on down to the party!"

I did as commanded and scampered out of the thorn-and-bramble forest to find Hussein, Sultan, and Seylah howling with laughter and pointing toward a ball of fire and smoke about a mile away. It was an armored personnel carrier that the Russians had themselves destroyed.

"There were two columns, and we tricked them into attacking each other!" gasped Hussein, laughing. "It's been a regular circus here, ha!"

And one that I had missed.

Not all members of Hussein's band were thrilled with my war enthusiasm. One of the men, Xamid, had taken to staring at me and directing non sequitur questions and comments that I imperfectly understood. The thing that I did understand was that he had taken a visceral dislike to me.

Returning from one of my nocturnal rooftop vigils one night among the nights, I accidentally interrupted some sort of planning conference and heard Xamid saying, in Russian, "He just wants fighting, although he himself is afraid."

Was he talking about me? Even if only a paranoid projection of mine, so much was clear: I was—had become—utterly and completely dependent on the tolerance and humor of seven men who were holding guns and not cameras, and laying their lives on the line on a daily basis for a cause with which I was only romantically associated. I decided to keep my distance from Xamid to the extent possible.

My favorite in the group of men using Hussein's home as their base was his tall, lanky cousin, Shirvani. When not out inspecting the defensive lines, he was reading. Much of the time it was a Russian translation of the Quran, although he did not seem particularly religious. He had spent his youth in Kazakhstan as a shepherd on a collective farm, before getting drafted into the Red Army. His term of service was spent hoisting nuclear warheads at a base in Uzbekistan.

"Two of my Chechen comrades on the same team died of cancer," he laconically recalled. "The Russians always gave us the dirt jobs."

The younger men, Ali, Seylah, and Ussam, shared much less of themselves. They were all mechanics, as I recall—but maybe I only recall it that way because they were all mechanically adept; then, so were all Chechens, it seemed. It was almost a generic national trait, like the Chechen familiarity with weapons. Then there was Ussam's wife Rana. But due to *adat,* or the custom that suggested maintain-

ing a respectful distance between males and females, I learned nothing about the woman who cooked all our meals (and, I suspect, cleaned all our boots every night.) Once, however, she did whisper to me that she would have preferred to be back in Kazakhstan and not here with a group of guerrillas in a surrounded town. As for Sultan—well, at heart he was a fifteen-year-old kid just feeling his hormones. I remember catching him sneaking up a ladder on his grandfather's roof in order to peek at (or maybe signal) the girl in the garden next door, planting onions. Hussein's father and mother, meanwhile, remained silent spectral presences. I never even learned their names, and the only time we spoke could hardly be called conversation.

It happened one morning as I was on my way to the latrine. The German shepherd chained in the yard started growling and yapping, snarling and barking, but not exactly at me. Suddenly my human ears tuned in to dog decibels, and I dove for the remnant corn stalks in the garden while the dog did a tail-between-the-legs dash for the nearest wall, just as a SUK fighter-bomber came *ssscreeEEAAMMing* overhead, or at least near enough to seem to be aiming at *me*.

"You finished with the . . . the unspeakable . . . or trying to dig a new one?"

It was Hussein's father, wool cap jauntily perched on his head, a jug of ass-wash water in hand, and a sardonic smile on his face.

"Please, you go first," I replied, picking myself up from the garden floor.

My fear of flying had been permanently replaced by another phobia: to die in an outhouse, literally blasted into shit.

Although Samashki was theoretically surrounded, there were always visitors bringing news from different parts of the everchanging "front" as well as the occasional vehicle bearing the occasional foreign journalist or relief worker on a quick drive through. The journalists always looked edgy and like they wanted to get back out as soon as they had shot their obligatory B-roll shots of guys with guns.

". . . security is tight in this Chechen town, with rebels 'inspecting all vehicles . . .' "

News.

Once, Hussein flagged down one of these "foreigner vehicles" (so called because they tended to be big, white, and brand-new land cruisers) that belonged to the Doctors Without Borders organization, and began berating the terrified French medics inside about how they were letting themselves be used by the Russian authorities. Moscow only allowed them to deliver symbolic aid, he charged, and only to places where Moscow wanted it to go. In other words, the foreign do-gooders were de facto participating in ethnic cleansing, as well as the creation of unnatural dependencies. Poor doctors. They could only nod and hope Hussein was not really as mean as he seemed. At a certain point, I thought it best to tell them that they were not in danger.

"But you speak English so well for a Chechen!" uttered a very surprised and relieved doctor.

Nor was all my time spent with Hussein and his men. For entertainment mixed with information gathering, I had become a regular over at Alkhazur's blacksmith shop, which also served as a local after-hours men's club of a certain fashion. Every night, fighters, petty merchants, and diverse hangers-on would gather in the blacksmith's livingroom to drink tea, watch scratchy Chechen television (beamed in via satellite by a Turkish fund) and play cards. I never understood the rules of the game, but it always seemed to end when losers were obliged to perform something I took to calling the "duck dance," a shake-your-bottom sort of movement that was sufficiently humiliating in a good-natured sort of way to send peals of laughter around the room.

One night, I found everyone at Alkhazur's nightclub glued to a tiny television powered by a generator. It was tuned to the so-called Presidential Channel, a frequency that only operated when President Djohar Dudayev deigned to talk to the nation from a secret location in the mountains. The broadcast link was provided via a Turkish satellite connection paid for by diaspora Chechens in Istanbul. Finally, the president appeared on air. I did not even need a running commentary.

Dudayev smirked, scowled, threatened, joked, pontificated, and generally hammed it up in front of the camera. Truly, what a strange man. And given present circumstances, it was almost embarrassing.

And I was starting to learn something of the clickity-clack growl of the Chechen tongue. I do not want to exaggerate my fluency in the language; I never got beyond a handful of nouns and verbs, greetings and goodbyes, and I depended on Russian as a means of communication. Still, here is a list of words I put down in my notebook for memorization. I have no idea why the list appears the way it does, or even if the conjugations of the verbs are accurate.

predatl—traitor
michawu—where
tzigawu—there
igawu—over there
kuzawu—here
jal—dog
so-ne-le'e—I want
huna le'e—you want
tsuna le'e—he wants
tkun le'e—we want
ho su-ne yeza—I love you
busa dika yurl—six nights
ura dika yurl—six months
de dika yurl—six days
sura dika yurl—six years

Why I was focusing on the concept of "six" I cannot today explain. Nor the "I love you" in the middle of the list, or why I passed over the most memorable Chechen noun-adjective construct that stuck in most reporters' minds: *dick cunt*. It meant "good boy."

The word at the top of the list, *predatl*, was actually a loan word from the Russian. In both Russian and Chechen, it meant "traitor." The

reason for its appearance was that it reflected Hussein's primary concern about certain personalities in town, which of course then became my concern as well.

The primary focus of Hussein's attention was a group of elders, and specifically the local imam, or prayer leader, at the Friday Mosque on the southern edge of town. Like virtually all religious leaders in the post-Soviet Union, ranging from the Russian Orthodox Patriarch in Moscow to every parish priest, deacon, or rabbi in Siberia, the imam had been appointed and remained a paid employee of the formerly Soviet, but now legally Russian, state. The fact that it was his stamp and seal that ratified the various ceasefire agreements only added to the suspicion on the street (or at least in the Hussein household) that the imam had at least two masters: Allah and the FSB, or renamed Soviet KGB. Complicating the picture even more was the fact that the imam's brother, also an Islamic cleric, was a welcome guest at Hussein's house—and the man who had taken upon himself to turn Hussein, a former collective farm captain and atheist, into a believing and prayer-conscious Muslim.

Welcome to the post-Soviet hall of mirrors!

I have no idea what evidence Hussein possessed about the imam's alleged collaboration with the Russian military. Certainly, the imam was the point man for all negotiations and contacts with Russian authorities in the area, and frequently traveled out to Post 13, the bunker-and-trench checkpoint on the Sernovodsk road, to meet with said authorities. Accompanying him was a small group of other elders, one of whom was the obsessive diarist of the town, Akhmad Amaev—a man I started to refer to as "the Samuel Pepys of Samashki." He was also the father of Hussein's armored vest tailor, the guerilla who bore such a striking resemblance to the youngest of the Cartwright brothers on the TV show *Bonanza* that I had nicknamed him "Little Joe."

From what I gathered, in Hussein's view the imam was guilty of accommodation with the Russians. But did that mean treason? Or was the Imam merely reflecting the opinion of the people in town—minority or majority—who did not think that hand-to-hand fighting

with the Russians on the streets of Samashki was the best of their options?

The irony of this apparent distinction was that in many ways, lifelong residents of Samashki were both *more* traditional and *less* nationalistic than more recent returnees from the Chechen diaspora, such as Hussein and his men, and thus less likely to take up arms to defend the new national homeland, but more insistent that the theoretical protocols governing behavior—*adat*—be rigorously observed. A son or younger brother must not smoke in front of a father or elder brother; if a person older than you enters a room, you must rise and stay standing until the elder has sat down. If you see an elder on the street, you must stop until he passes. You must never, ever speak to an elder until spoken to. For Hussein and his men, these protocols (admittedly observed more in the breach than rule) were stark nonsense. So was the idea of absolute loyalty to one's *taip,* or clan. While this was allegedly a fundamental building block of the Chechen identity, I never learned what Hussein's *taip* was because he dismissed it as being completely irrelevant. And as for religious zeal, such as dancing the *zikr*—well, I remember Hussein taking lessons from his father one day about the basics of how Muslims pray. Amazingly, he apparently did not know how.

"The war has destroyed the concept of *taip,* as it is destroying other social barriers in traditional Chechen society," he explained. "And this is good."

But wasn't the war, in essence, about protecting and preserving traditional Chechen society from further Russifying encroachments?

One answer, I guess, was to be found in the new Russian disco music playing on Sultan's radio night after night, and the delirious consumerism, based on sex appeal, beamed into the living room via the new Russian private television stations, if and when the generator was fired up and working. *Buy this toothpaste or buy that deodorant, and dream of that new kitchen set for your house in a town that has no plumbing!*

The alternative to that sort of saturation bombing of the soul was

to be found elsewhere, and in traditions of which Hussein and his men did not partake.

That was *zikr,* or the wild dance of remembrance I had first seen in prewar Grozny more than a year before. In Samashki, there seemed to be one held almost nightly in different parts of town, although I never saw Hussein or any of his military clan participate.

I would be coming back from Alkhazur's or my rooftop wait, returning to Hussein's when I would turn a corner and then catch a buzz-like reverberation.

Distant singing voices, male, deep.

A chant, weaving its way up into and beyond the firmament.

Next came the rhythm.

Clapping. *Stomping.* Yes, stomping, like at a barn dance in Montana.

Yes, there at a house among the houses in the darkened, drab, and muddy town of Samashki, something was happening. A *zikr* for another young man just killed that day.

"Ho—ahhhh!" came the tone of the tenor, sustained over a millennium.

"La illah il Allah," came the multibaritone backdrop.

I cannot vouch for the meaning of Chechen tenors' lines, but the bottom is all Quranic Arabic, the *Shahidah,* or Confession of Faith. I have heard those words in a thousand different circumstances before—in mosques as diverse as those in Egypt, Syria, Iran, and Uzbekistan, and from the lips of Muslims not only from those counties, but also in New York, Moscow, London, and Cape Town. But never, ever had the words of the Muslim Creed filled me with such unexplainable awe as there in Samashki, Chechnya. And at the moment the dirge moves from soul piercing to something that has no name, a door opens and a crack of light spills out on the muddy lane and a voice calls out in the darkness and suddenly I am inside among a mass of people, forty sweating men thumping, stomping, and dashing barefoot in a tight

circle around the wooden floor of the living-room, chanting *"Allah, Allah, Allah, God, God, God!"* into delirium, while above it all that solo tenor keeps on keening, backed up by a wall of baritones, invoking the Highest Name for mercy, forgiveness, understanding for our foibles, and the strength to effect His terrible revenge on those who betray His trust.

"La illahi il Allah!"

My shoes are off as is my coat and flak jacket, which has never seemed so ridiculous an accessory as here and now. The camera is out and the lens fogging up with the sudden change of indoor and outdoor heat and the blast of human-based humidity—or maybe it was just the viewfinder or my glasses.

Swirling, self-hurling, stomping, singing!

And as suddenly as it started, the *zikr* is over, or at least put on very sudden pause.

Bread and beef broth in bowls and then bowls of tea to fortify the soul. Sweets. Now a bearded man in a far corner, who looks like Commander Santa but might be anyone with a white beard and skull cap, stands, and every one else in the room does the same, turning their palms toward heaven while the bearded man who might be Santa recites the Muslim Creed. Then either he or someone else strikes a high, plaintive note and the rest of the men in the room respond in one baritone voice, and the mystic ceremony begins once again, slowly working its way from the communal, harmonic chanting of God's name, to the first slow clapping of hands and then the first hard stepping of foot on floor until it evolves, *as it must*, into the wild, barndance, stomping circle of ecstatic men transfixed by the moment, as am I. The nocturnal barrage has begun again, although none of the spiritual athletes seem too concerned. The *zikr* devotees might dance all night, dancing in the face of doom, remembering.

Then one night, the news carried on Moscow radio got everyone's attention. It stated that up to four hundred "Dudayevist bandits"

had gathered in Samashki and were threatening local leaders for advocating a peaceful surrender of the town and allowing the train to pass.

"Four hundred armed men?" chortled Xamid, smiling at the audacity of Russian lies.

Hussein was less amused.

"That is the start of their propaganda campaign," he said darkly. "We have to act."

8

HUNTER AND HUNTED

Beginning on March 13, the roads surrounding Samashki were completely blocked. At their regular meeting on March 17, General Alekseev arrived with Kosolapov. On the same day, a military train arrived at the Samashki station to restore the railroad. Conscripts serving in the railroad forces who arrived with the train repaired the mined railroad tracks between Sernovodsk and Samashki . . . residents were in a difficult position. On the one hand, the Russian military, as a consequence of negotiations held on March 23–25, got the military train through Samashki. Had that not occurred, another Russian general participating in negotiations threatened to use force . . . Dudayev fighters who turned up through the forest demanded villagers not allow the train to pass through. Pro-Dudayev snipers wounded two soldiers, and previously, in mid-March, two railroad bridges were blown up between Sernovodsk and Samashki."[8]

That report, culled from page twenty-two of the meticulously researched Memorial Human Rights Center report on the massacre at Samashki, dramatically underlines the problems involved in reconstructive history—and especially the problem of dependency on the Moscow press. I say this with all due respect. But the fact remains that the Memorial report, while correct in general, is wrong in particulars. There were no "Dudayevist snipers" or "fighters who turned up

8 Sakharov Foundation, *By All Available Means*, Memorial Report (Moscow, 1996), p. 22.

in the forest" attempting to blow up bridges to stop a military train from plowing through town. Said train never made it to Samashki. And the forest snipers were natives, with names. Hussein, his brother Ussam, their cousin Shirvani, and their nephew Sultan—and men named Xamid, Seylah, and Ali.

And me.

The plan is to attack the train if it comes or to scare off the track repair team if it approaches the section sabotaged the night before. I missed that bit of action because I was either rooftop waiting, or at that *zikr,* or maybe sleeping. If they had told me, I would have come along, although apparently it was not pretty.

"We ran into a patrol," says Hussein. "Sultan was sick at what he did, what he had to do, but he is better, now."

First blood.

Hussein jerks his head in the direction of a back room, where his fifteen-year-old nephew is listening to some Russian pop music on a radio, and mimes a puke.

I spend the morning with Ussam and Seylah as they sort out a batch of shells they managed to acquire overnight from a merchant who had somehow made an appropriate transaction with some deserting Russian soldiers. I wonder if that is the sort of thing my original guide, Isa, is involved with. I have not seen him or his brother Muhammad for days, weeks. I stand on the bed and record Ussam and Seylah as they meticulously clean the hundreds of bullets dumped out on a comforter on the floor, making little piles of good and bad bullets (how did they know?) before loading the sharp, pointy Kalashnikov rounds in banana clips, and the big, heavy-caliber stuff into a bandolier belt. The AK rounds look almost delicate next to the metal-piercing machine-gun slugs. The bullet part is as big as a man's index finger, sticking outside the shell casing brass. Some have little red rings around the stubby tip identifying that sort of round as being tracers or something. I don't know and am embarrassed to ask, because admit-

ting I am not knowledgeable about this lethal stuff would cause a loss of face.

Sultan is dispatched with the heavy machine gun hidden beneath a load of hay in a small donkey-drawn cart. He is supposed to look like an innocent shepherd or something. Hussein, Shirvani, and Xamid go through a different part of the thicket, while Ussam, Seylah, and Ali bring the ammunition. I tag along with them, grateful for my personal load of cameras and tripod because it absolves me of asking if I could help carry one of the bandoliers. But what would I say if they asked? Refuse out of general press principle? I guess so. What would they think? Would *I* tolerate my presence if I were *them*? Hussein seems to be taking his personification of the Chechen spirit literally and seriously. It is like I have become his own private camera team. Come to think of it, I am.

We weave our way through the thicket until we get to the edge of a large, denuded field overlooking the Samashki–Sernovodsk road that runs parallel to the railway tracks.

Seylah grabs the bandolier of heavy-caliber slugs, scoots out from the thicket and disappears from sight, the way a rabbit does when it has found its hutch. In this case the hutch is the forward gun pit, which is basically just a hole in the ground covered with twigs and scrub. That is where Hussein is already hiding. Well, not exactly hiding. Lurking in wait with a heavy-caliber machine gun is more like it. He is wearing some outsized plastic glasses he picked up somewhere. They are clearly not his.

The other guys fan out in the bush and start digging blinds.

"I don't like this place," mutters Xamid.

Ali, lazy, merely laughs and lets Ussam dig for two. Shirvani smokes. Sultan is nowhere to be seen.

Field lunch. Soviet Army spam and onions. Some Muslim fundamentalists, my pals, chowing down on cold pork like that.

"You know what kind of rock this is?" Shirvani asks me, picking up a blue-gray stone.

I turn it over in my hand once or twice and confess I have no idea.

"We call it Leaverite," says Shirvani, taking back the stone and putting it back on the ground from where he had picked it up. "Leaverite here."

Everyone chuckles with the exception of me, and then it sinks in.

Junk stone. *Leave 'er right here.*

Another round of pork spam and raw onions. More hunter jokes that could have come from any camp I ever sat at in Montana, *haha.* I relate the concept of "bear bells," meaning that rather than be afraid of the sound of guns during elk season, some grizzly bears have come to associate a distant blast with dead deer and elk, and actually run *toward* the sound of shooting because they know it means a free meal that they did not have to work for. Seylah thinks about that one for a while, while Xamid hits me up with a non-sequitur question about my income level and marital status and makes me feel strangely and suddenly nervous in his presence again. Shirvani asks for a smoke and we chat about farming, ranching, sheep and the theoretical problem of brucellosis-infected buffalo escaping from Yellowstone Park and contaminating Montana cattle herds. Ali smiles and Ussam sulks. Sultan finally shows up with a shit-eating grin on his face, as though his absence has to do with that neighbor gal planting spring onions next door.

Boys will be boys.

More field work. More gun pits. Slit trenches and tank traps covered by a couple of guys planting spring potatoes on the front line. Sun shines. Beautiful day. See for miles, it seems. Couple of pretty horses wander by, legs tethered. Couple of shepherd kids gather firewood. If they notice us, they don't let on. Maybe they are part of the ambush cover, sort of a screen of innocence, in case Russian spotters are scanning the forest line from the tracks or the facing hills. The Russians would be criminally negligent *not* to have spotters up there, thinks Johnny-come-lately military expert, me.

Couple of cars on the distant road, moving toward Samashki. They are just small specks, but still useful to calculate distance. I figure the road is less than a mile away. Maybe eight hundred yards. That is still

a very long shot, especially with a gun with no telescopic sight, and Hussein has only got those funny-looking, oversized glasses. Greenhorn hunters in Montana like to brag about killing deer and elk from a mile away, but those stories are nothing but lies. Best shot I ever killed at was maybe four hundred yards and more likely only three hundred that felt like four, and that was with a scope on top of Tim Cahill's 30.06 he let me use that day. Best shot I had with my trusty 30-30 saddle gun without a scope was maybe 250 yards that was more likely half that and that was just sheer luck. Nice buck, though.

Daydreaming done.

There is a truck on the road. No, two trucks. Now three. Military green.

I don't know what is on them, but there is little doubt in my mind that we are outgunned three-to-one, and the mission was to ambush a train track repair crew and not take on half an army. The convoy is moving up the hill on a dirt road in back of the tracks, and Hussein is going to let them pass. *Let them pass, Hussein, let them—*

KirBAAMMM!!!

The percussion of Hussein's mini-Howitzer shatters the morning air, and the red flare of barrel blast is so big that I pick it up on film. If I can see it, they can see it, and if they can see it, then they can see us.

KirBAAMMM!!!

Hussein seems intent on sealing our fate by launching a second potshot at the distant armor. *Jesus Christ*. The guys are hunkered down in their foxholes. *Christ* they look small and pathetic. The foxholes, that is. Ali isn't laughing anymore, and I am not laughing at all because while Xamid's pit is the deepest and Ali's the shallowest, I do not have a foxhole at all. Just twigs and sticks, like a badly made bird blind. And the camera. The tripod legs reflect like a steel beacon, and the microphone sticks out like a sore thumb. No. It sticks out like the muzzle of a heavy machine gun. I muddied up everything before this little romp in the woods but now my equipment seems to scream *here he is, so get him!* and it is too late to do anything about it now. Afraid to move. Afraid to breathe. If anybody on the other side is scouring

the tree line with binoculars of any power, they are going to find *me* looking like the sniper, and not Hussein.

KirBAAMMM!!!

Hussein again. Big barrel flash. Big *kirbam!*

Are those gun flashes from the other side of the distant road? Is that a *woosh* over my head? I try to sniggle backward into the thornbush forest, but it is just too thick and I am going nowhere and losing my pathetic cover at the same time.

KirBAAMMM!!!

Only one thing to do. Only one way to go. Only one safe place. *Do it, now. Suck it up and just go!* Heart in my mouth, balls shriveled into my gut, I snatch the camera gear and run. *Forward,* straight across the open ground between the tree line and Hussein's ambush pit. *Run* like the wind you fool. *Fly!* It may look like you crave action but the only thing you really want is a hole in the ground as deep as a grave to hide in.

One two three. One—two—THREE!

And I am in the gun pit, lungs bursting and heart pounding after the fastest fifty-yard dash of my life, trying, trying, *trying* to hide my utter terror.

"What are you doing here?" Hussein shouts. *"This is MY war, not YOURS!!!!"*

I say something useless and so incomprehensible I cannot understand it myself. It doesn't matter a wit. Hussein isn't listening. He is yanking on the big gun's bolt. A dead shell leaps out over his head and hits me in the shoulder, dropping on my boot, still hot. That is not my main concern, however. My main concern is my realization that Hussein is loading the big gun manually. *Manually.* The bandolier feeder thing doesn't work. We are taking manual potshots at three armored vehicles that can come back at us with fucking automatic fire.

"Toi matz," Hussein curses in Russian, jamming another round into his gun.

The hunt has just turned. The hunters have become the hunted.

I had been shot at before. I had taken many risks, some foolish, in combat zones, too. I had ridden in overstuffed rescue helicopters under fire and traveled down quite a few mined or allegedly mined roads (the rumor being good enough to scare the wits out of you) to have earned my stripes in the vain league of combat correspondents. "Bridge Too Far Tommy" is what some of my professional pals called me.

But this was different. All those yarns of ducking flying lead here and there, and amazingly managing to live to tell the tale were in the context of coincidence, such as getting caught in the rear guard of someone else's army on the run. I had never been involved in an ambush before, pitting under-armed guerillas against vastly superior forces. And in broad daylight.

KirBAAMMM!!!

It is Hussein's gun, firing one shot for every three hundred sixty-five of theirs.

Woosh, woosh!

Return fire into the thorn-bushes where I once innocently dwelled.

Woosh, woosh, woosh!

I am sure I am going to die in this six-foot pit, this grave. And all because I have bought into the idea of war as entertainment. *Bang Bang, yeah.*

I sneak my head above ground just far enough to stick the camera lens out and click off a few seconds of whatever is shooting at us from the other side of the tracks. I mean, if you are insane enough to be out on this little ambush romp, you may as well complete the picture by doing your job and getting the *bang bang* that folks back home find so very entertaining. I have screwed my courage and stupidity to the sticking place and my head is above the rim of the pit and I am shooting film just as Hussein is shooting his 70-caliber small cannon broken tank machine gun at the armored beasts across the field. I want this camera of mine or the microphone that looks so much like an over-under gun mount to be just that right now, and I want the camera not to record but to recoil like my trusty 30-30 or maybe my left-eject,

pawnshop special twelve-gauge shotgun letting loose against the metal beasts that are trying to kill me, kill us.

KirBAAMMM!!! KirBAAMMM!!! would be the sound of my film. *KirBAAMMM!!!*

"You are out of your mind!!" screams Hussein, pulling me back down into the pit.

Seylah's face is white; his pants are stained wet from the inside. So are mine.

I look to my left; Hussein is crouching, studying something through his stupid glasses. Seylah, at the far end of the pit, is sneaking a peek through the Seemores, as some folks call binoculars in Montana. *See more,* get it? *Leaverite?* Haha!

Think of anything else. *Anything.*

Now Seylah is shouting at Hussein, but in Chechen, so I do not understand anything but the word *kamaz,* the Russian word for truck.

Truck.

One of the three trucks seems to be struggling up the muddy dirt path. Like that one mule deer that always lingers behind the rest when they know you are downwind in that coulee underneath the ridge. A calm settles over the gun pit. Hussein marginally adjusts the oversized glasses he is wearing. They look utterly ridiculous on his face. Seylah coughs something. Coordinates, I guess. I hit "run" on the back of the camera; I have about three minutes of battery life left and I left the spares in my backpack, hidden in the thorn bushes that incredibly distant fifty yards behind me.

kirbam . . .

The blast is almost musical as the world slows, stops. Then, distantly, after two or three or five seconds, a soft, almost gentle *thud.* No, not a *thud. Thud* carries the sense of something hitting the earth, dirt. This is different. This is deadly. It is the unmistakable sound of metal meeting metal. *Whack,* maybe.

The distant truck is stopped on the slope. Then a sputter of red, a flame. Then a short, quick burp as the motor explodes and whatever or whoever was in the truck is very dead.

Seylah hugs Hussein in that attenuated way of snaking one hand around the back that serves as the Chechen handshake.

Congratulations on your kill.

I am about to vomit for joy.

9 SIEGE AND SURVIVAL

"It's time for you to leave," said Hussein that night after a supper of beef broth and pickles. "It is going to get nasty around here soon."

I tried to explain that I still had more work to do, images to capture, interviews to conduct. Hussein dismissed my arguments with the sweep of a hand.

"I am a farmer, and not a specialist in photojournalism," he said. "But it seems to me that you have an abundance of rich material for your stated project. *Our* stated project. This is not your war; it is mine. And given present realities, my fear is now that you will lose all the material you have accumulated because you will get killed foolishly and needlessly. It is time for you to go. No, I *order* you to go. It is *our* film, too."

The problem was, how to get out.

"I think it almost impossible that the local traitors have not informed on you to the KGB," Hussein pointed out. "It is most likely that you will be arrested and searched on sight, and your tapes—*our tapes*—seized and destroyed, or used against us in some way."

He was right. I was not a reporter with a notebook that could be memorized and destroyed before it fell into the wrong hands. I was a high-profile courier, bearing an often-incriminating collection of cassettes. In a word, I had the physical evidence that Hussein and all his men were participants in what the world regarded as a rebellion. Hussein, said my pictures, was a rebel. And one man's rebel may be another man's freedom fighter, but he is also another man's terrorist.

The issue of disposing of the tapes gnawed at both of us. One way

to get them out would be to hide them on the person of either a respected elder—such as Hussein's father—or a woman, such as Ussam's wife, Rana. The security checkpoints generally did not check women or the elderly, and a bribe here or there could generally help get things done. The problem was what to do with the tapes, once past the checkpoints. Who was to be trusted in Sernovodsk, Slepsovski, or distant Nazran, the headquarters of most of the floating journalists in the theater of war? I did not know anyone there—and neither, for that matter, did Hussein.

Finally, we hit upon a solution that made everyone equally nervous. By sheerest chance—or was it, the paranoid in me wondered—an old school friend of Hussein's had shown up in town to take a look at the ancestral homeland and the general situation. His name was Musa, a thoroughly Russified Chechen living in Moscow. I had the ABC bureau's telephone number, so they could theoretically pick up the stash. As for trusting Musa to perform his part of the bargain—well, Hussein had blessed the venture and made the introduction.

We met for breakfast at Musa's family home at midmorning. A silent woman walked in with tea; noisy kids reached for Hussein's gun and wanted to play. I said something about the nature of the tapes and Hussein interrupted, launching into a long lecture about history, Chechen nationalism, and love of country that culminated in the recollection of the use of tombstones in the local cemetery, where both he and Musa had once played.

It was a touching, intimate moment between two old friends, and I was reaching for my camera to capture it on tape when the regular morning drone of distant helicopters came closer—and closer and closer—until the whole house was buzzing from the whirling blades and windows were shuddering and threatening to implode.

"Vertilot!" shouted Hussein, grabbing his weapon and spinning out the door. "Helicopters!"

Ridiculously, Musa urged me to stay and finish the breakfast that had just arrived on the table. I did not so much decline as bolt, dropping the camera and breaking the on/off switch in so doing. I had forgotten that my left prehensile thumb no longer worked.

A bread knife was on the table, so I grabbed it and carved off the plastic around the broken switch until I hit the main metal toggle, and then I carved still further until I could get a finger in deep enough to turn the camera on and off in a way it was not designed for, but it still worked. Then I was out the door and down the street and sprinting into the cough and sputter and *brrrt! brrrt! brrrt!* of heavy-caliber machine guns and small cannon sounds ripping the air like crumpled paper.

The station. The mosque. The road. The periphery. I tried to make a mental map of where and what the Russians were shooting at.

Wham! A rocket slammed into a tractor trying to make it across the street a block ahead of me, and I looked up and almost casually noted the presence of a helicopter floating in the air straight down the street from where I was standing. It was searching for people looking exactly like me—or so I concluded. I dove toward the shelter of a nearby wall and found a knot of people huddled in utter terror who were already making maximum use of the thin protection it provided. I took their picture. They looked like what they were; a bunch of very frightened people huddling in utter terror in the shadow-shelter of a wall.

Not good television. Good television was on the street. Or actually, good television was the helicopter shooting down the street at us or at least in our general direction. I had to act fast, or fail—which could be worse than dying, sometimes. I knew I was on the verge of a massive failure of nerve, so if I didn't do it then, I never would.

I put the camera on the tripod and stepped out into the middle of the road.

Done.

I only had to turn the camera on and make sure I did not turn it off. I stuck my finger inside the hole I carved in the casing and tickled the toggle switch. The camera clicked and whirred and the timer started to count seconds shot and film left to shoot.

Done.

There was a new shudder down the street. A chopper. I was faced

with a decision. I could dive back toward the wall without the camera and maybe film my own death when that chopper shot its pods at me, as it clearly would, or I could start shooting back on full automatic before the chopper blasted it and maybe me to kingdom come.

What was I doing here?

Take a step. Forward. Another. *Go.* Pick up the camera with your *right* hand; squeeze the tripod around your waist. *Keep filming.* Get tighter. Don't forget you cannot refocus with your left hand because only your left-hand fingers work and you can't get a grip on the lens without that thumb. Use your *right* hand for that, and I do not care if you have never used it for focusing a lens before. Learn *now*. Learn *fast*. You better learn how to focus now and fast with your right hand because that metal bird is looking down its crosshair sights at you just like you are looking down your crosshair sights at it, only the difference is you are shooting film and it is shooting rockets.

Wham!

The rocket just made a bunch of burger out of the cows fifty feet ahead.

Move.

Move in jags. *Bunny right, bunny left.* Don't give them a clean shot. Make 'em blast you on the turn, on the jog, on the rabbit-run up these oh-so-straight streets.

Bunny, bunny, and it ain't funny.

Wham! Brrt! Brrrt!

By the time I got to the mosque, the station was ablaze—and the real firefight began.

The armored train, again.

It was maybe half a mile away, spitting flame from the tanks and big guns aboard it, spraying the big, empty houses used as sniper nests on the town's southern periphery. The problem was, I needed to film it broadside, or at least at a better angle than I had. Mixing sprinting and insanity, I got up to the crossroads beyond the bridge, beyond the

mosque, and hunkered down behind some pathetically thin chunks of three-foot-thick concrete slabs of something. It was only about two feet high but at least it was three feet thick and solid.

I caught my breath and assessed the neighborhood. Guys were squirting out of nowhere, running for their lives across my lens. *Really* hauling ass. Others huddled in ditches, pissing in their pants, too afraid to move. Then a gate opened and out walked a man dressed all in black and wearing a black fedora and white shoes, who just sort of sauntered down the road as if nothing particular was going on. I shoot it all.

War is weird.

But my focus was the train. I had to get it broadside. I had to get in front of it. A helicopter wooooshed overhead while I rolled and then scooted out from behind my concrete-block salvation and lurched—*no, I flew like the very wind!*—down what I called Mosque Street. Behind me came a white car and a bus—*a fucking passenger bus!*—and as machine guns rattled and the larger stuff burped, the bus driver hit the gas and *saaaaggged* around the white car, nearly turning over during the course of that very stupid maneuver. *You wanna survive the shooting, but die in a dumb accident?*

Brrt, brrt, brrt!

Boom, boom, boom!

Talk about dumb accidents, I say to myself. You are stuck in a surrounded town under fire and trying to get as close to the source of that fire as you can. No, that is no accident. It is just dumb. Nuts. Suicidal, maybe. Should have tried to leave in that Doctors Without Borders vehicle the other day. *Should of, would of, could of, but now nothing to be done. You are here, so catch your breath and make a career out of it.* You need a stand-up, or narrative-spoken-to-camera. Actually, a squat-down. Get your sorry self in front of the lens, now, and do a little reporting for posterity in case you get killed, but your stupid camera survives and is found intact by the heirs to my job.

"The final assault has begun. We will see if the defenders of this small Chechen town in the northern plains can resist the Russian

attack—and if I can get my sorry ass out of here at the end of it. Lest anyone forget, this is a surrounded town."

I taped two takes, the first with the "sorry ass" reference that just sort of slipped out of my mouth, and the second without reference to body parts. Then I picked up the camera with my right hand, hunkered down the street shielded by barns and buildings, and headed toward the point I estimated the armored train to be firing from—and then ran into some guy who confirmed my estimation. I turned on the camera as he signaled me to follow him to the front.

Brrt, brrt, brrt!

Boom, boom, boom!

The percussive sound of shooting was a lot louder and closer, even if I was still tucked behind a wall. My guide to the front turned the near corner of that wall, and I and my camera eye followed him around to the next step in the get-to-the-front exercise.

"Fuck!"

That is my voice on camera, looking through the lens at a partially built, two-story red-brick house some two hundred yards across completely exposed, open ground. Maybe it is only one hundred yards away, but it looks more like a mile.

"Fuck," I repeat, ruining the audio for any commercial use of this very entertaining material collected on March 27, 1995.

And then I began to run, camera blazing, capturing every stumble and jolt as I galloped toward those half-built brick walls that promised the only shelter for miles around, and the only thing between the armored train and me for several centuries. And all for the sake of *Bang-bang.* It was, without question, the most insane thing I have ever done in my life.

I shot, they shot—I shot them shooting. The big guns on the train roared. The sniper rifles in our attic roost snapped and snarled. The unfinished red brick walls of the two-story house were exactly the thickness of form-cast, red bricks. Their bullets were bigger than ours.

Boom!

A tank shell of some sort erupted from a muzzle we could see.

Whiiizzz!

The shell passed overhead, missing.

They really knew we were there; it was really time to go.

Down that ladder, down—no—jump! And *bam* the second shell shattered the wall of the room in which we just sat, splattering red dust down our necks as we tumbled out the unbuilt grand hallway entrance into the yard.

Don't even wait. Don't even turn on the fucking camera. Just suck it up. One—two—Three and—sprint. . . .

Back across that killing space, that two hundred yards that was probably only one hundred but felt like a fucking mile. My lungs were bursting, heart popping, legs dying, brain seizing—and I *slliddd* in safe behind that street wall and gagged.

The street was filled with folks. Literally. They were sitting in the street behind their own periphery walls, taking casual cover. Some played cards. Others just sat. I recognized a few from Alkhazur's night-club.

"How's tricks, *Toms?*" asked Vakha, a local wag I saw everywhere, but never with a gun. And he didn't have one then.

Another was Bekhist, a grandmotherly woman of about forty, maybe fifty. It was hard to tell. All she could do was laugh. Actually, almost everyone was smiling. Smiles painted on their faces. *Laugh, laugh, laugh.*

I scuttled down the street in the general direction of the gun pit and Hussein. I ran into Xamid and Sultan or Seylah. Maybe both, I forget. They were not laughing. Ali had been hit. I backtracked and ran to the hospital dispensary and burst in, camera blazing.

"No filming in the hospital!" shrieked a nurse.

"No problem, he is with us."

It was Ali, lying on a bloodstained bed with Ussam tending him.

He was flesh-wounded and laughing.

I took my usual series of ducks and dodges back to the front lines, working my way toward the bramble forest and Hussein's ambush pit via the farmhouse sniper's nest. It was completely smashed. Beyond it, the armored train continued to pour withering fire at whatever it was shooting at.

Broadside.

Then the shooting slowed. Then it slacked. Then it ceased.

And then the armored train started moving back down the tracks, *away* from Samashki.

I was now in the bramble forest, exchanging *God is Great* passwords with guards.

"We are repositioning because of all the women on the road," said one.

Women on the road?

I changed direction, moving out of the familiar bramble gullies and up to the pasture apron between the forest and the Samashki–Sernavodsk road.

Did I see it or hear it first?

A tinkle of distant cymbals, or maybe the ethereal hum of chanting, a distant visual snatch of men in orange robes and shaven heads—the shock troops at the head of a column marching under a banner declaring the words *Ne Ubitz!*, meaning "Don't Kill"?!

The vision of this extraordinary column out on the road that should by rights have been filled with tanks and troop carriers was—well, extraordinary, and I started sprinting across the open pasture to intercept the marchers. I got to the highway, and breathlessly set up my camera to capture the moment, whatever and whoever they were.

Nam yoho renge kyo, Nam yoho renge kyo, chanted the dozen bald men, all dressed in yellow robes and tapping cymbals and drums. *Nam yoho renge kyo, Nam yoho renge kyo.*

La illahi il Allah! La illahi il Allah! wailed a chorus of Chechen women, following in the Buddhists' wake. *There is no God but The God!!!*

Was I hallucinating?

Was I going mad?

And, at that moment, a dark green Toyota—or maybe Mitsubishi sport-utility vehicle—wheeled up out of the ditch and stopped right in front of me. A door opened and a man with a camera got out smack-dab in front of mine, and I started adding my own audio to the extraordinary scene that spoke much more about my state of mind than the mood and intent of the marchers, which was peace.

10

MARCHING MOTHERS, MONKS—AND MIKICH

From *Planet Moskau,* by Sonia Mikich:

And then a discovery, one of those little, ridiculous comic moments that allowed us to breathe for just a moment during the course of this war. Among the fighters, I see a tallish, bearded man carrying a Hi-8 camera. Beneath a fantastic khaki uniform he is wearing body armor, and on his head a filthy, Uzbek-style cotton prayer cap. He glares at me with bloodshot eyes and shouts:

"Tell your fucking cameraman to get out of my fucking frame or I will fucking kill him!" *It is the familiar voice of my friend and colleague, Thomas Goltz—a journalist, madman, and adventurer. My Russian cameraman, Maxim, has walked through his frame—unconscionable! I have not seen Thomas for months. He smuggled himself into Chechnya from Azerbaijan and has been existing on noodles and garlic sauce. Stinking and sprinting, he has been filming the story of Samashki.*

"Thomas, it's me—Sonia!"

"Sorry, didn't recognize you. Say, by the way, you don't happen to have any Hi-8 tapes, now do you? I am nearly out, and everything here is going downhill pretty fast."

Without taking a second to excuse himself for the appalling greeting, and after having nicked me for some mineral water and chocolate, he manages to extract the promise from me to make him a member of my team in order to slip through checkpoint control.

"The Russians are after me."

"Why?"

"They think I have been helping the Chechens blow up the train tracks."

"Well, have you?

"No, not really. I just filmed it all and sort of encouraged them by my presence."

Thomas uses up the rest of his film. His documentary on Samashki will win prizes in the U.S.A. the next year. Filmed under life-threatening conditions, with passion.[9]

Sonia got a couple of the details wrong. I was not wearing a khaki uniform, my beard was gone, and the cap on my head was actually a gift from a Kurdish general in northern Iraq. I did win a runner-up prize for my work, but it was in Europe and not the U.S.A. But there is no question about her capturing the essence of the moment. I *was* crazed and about to attack her cameraman, and I *did* manage to impose myself on her team as my one chance to get out of town. God bless her for recognizing me. And for the chocolate.

Sonia's presence on the road outside Samashki was due to her part in—one might better use the word devotion to—one of the most extraordinary events of the Chechen war: the Soldiers' Mothers' March on Grozny.[10]

Drawn from all over Russia, and representing every class of woman in the vast land, from collective farm peasant to university instructor, some two hundred ladies had gathered in the Ingush capital of Nazran to march on Grozny and, presumably, end the war by demanding information about their sons who were either missing, captured, or simply conscripted and sent to cesspool Chechnya. Reinforced by a component of Quakers, a contingent of ethnic Russian converts to a

9 Sonia Mikich, *Planet Moskau: Geschichten aus dem neuen Russland* (Köln: Verlag Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1998), pp. 128, 129. Translation from the German is mine.

10 The Mothers' Movement was organized on a shoestring budget by Maria Ivanova Kirbasova from the Turkic/Buddhist Russian subrepublic of Kalmukia.

Japanese Buddhist order, and other antiwar activists, ranging from religious Jews to Eastern Orthodox Christians (and even a gaggle of Chechen and Ingush lady *zikr*-chanters), the pacifist protestors numbered perhaps four hundred when they turned the corner toward Samashki on the morning of March 27.

And that was the moment when my old friend Sonia Mikich, bureau chief of the German ARD office in Moscow, jumped out of the vehicle to intervene before I physically assaulted her cameraman, buying me off with mineral water and chocolate.

The column of 400 (or now 401, with me) reached the crossroads near the Friday Mosque within the next half-hour and then began moving down the main artery through town. Local women came pouring out of the homes, bearing traditional greetings of bread and salt and offering the tired and cold marchers beds for the night and basins to wash in. But there was no time to linger if the column was to make it to the larger city of Achkoi Martan, as planned. The big push to Grozny was scheduled for the next day.

I had to work quickly, too. *This was my out!* Making Sonia promise that she would not leave town without me, I dashed back to Hussein's house to grab my kit, and then dashed back to the convoy to stash my tapes and kit in her car. I would pick them up if and when I ever got back up to Moscow, I said. The point was to separate the tapes from my person and salvage one or the other, but not lose both.

"You're staying?" she asked with incredulity. *"I think not!"*

Although I was not her cameraman, Sonia was sensitive to needless risk in the line of reporting. She had been my friend Rory Peck's employer that sad October day in Moscow, 1993, when that extraordinary cameraman got his head blown off while reporting on Boris Yeltsin's bombing of the Russian parliament.

I assured her I would make every effort to leave. Maybe I could slip out with the Slavic Buddhist monks; my moustache was not in keeping with their naked faces, but at least I shaved my head like they did. The lack of an orange robe was admittedly a problem. On second

thought, maybe I could just insinuate myself into the mass of other, heterodox marchers. The Eastern Orthodox and Jews wore beards, as did the man identified as Chris Hunter, a young Englishman who led the Friends involved in the march, meaning the Quakers.

"Just get in!" cried Sonia Mikich, as I started off-loading my tapes and camera kit.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Shirvani. He clasped his hands together in a sign of friendship and victory, and raised them above his head, smiling.

"Adik yurl!" he shouted.

And then Sonia's ARD-mobile was spinning wheels down the road to catch up with the marching mothers and their other pacifist allies, passing them at some speed in order to get to Achkoi Martan to capture the glorious entry of the column on the penultimate day of their extraordinary action for peace and dignity. An action, I might add, that with the help of Sonia Mikich eventually won them a place in the annals of peace and protest marching (and won Sonia quite a few awards and well-deserved kudos, too). But that was later.

On the evening of March 27, the goal was to reach Achkoi Martan.

The mothers never made it. Neither did we.

"*Stoi!*" barked a sergeant of the armed forces of the Russian Federation, as Sonia's driver pulled up at the roadblock three kilometers outside Martan. "Stop!"

There was really no need to be told; two or three huge slabs of concrete had been lowered to completely block the road into town, and on either side of the highway the muddy fields seemed to be infested with armor: APCs of both the eight-wheel and track variety, known as BTRs and BMPs, and more distantly and menacingly, perhaps a dozen hulking specimens of the huge, self-propelled Russian cannon that fall under the general rubric "howitzer."

"Privet, rabonik!" called out Sonia's cameraman Maxim, the guy I had nearly assaulted outside Samashki. "How's tricks, guys?" There followed a friendly banter about where everyone was from, and which

school they had attended, and a variety of other Russian chitchat that put my Chechenized nerves on edge. *Sonia had just set herself up with a Russian agent who was going to turn me in!*

Of course Maxim had no such intention; his glad-handing, hale and hearty attitude, rather, was survivalist subterfuge honed through years of dealing with state authority.

"Keep him in the car!" he hissed in German, as he got out to schmooze with the well-armed guys wearing *Spesnatz* uniforms. He was referring, of course, to me.

"What seems to be the problem, sir?" asked Sonia when a huge specimen of *Spesnatz* ambled over to look at our papers. He stood at least six-foot-five, was built like that "Russian" boxer in *Rocky III*, and wore a black band around his forehead, the same way so many Chechen fighters wore the green Islamic band around theirs.

"Terrorists," he said. He was about to launch into an interrogation when the first group of Peace Marchers arrived, now traveling in a variety of cars culled from Samashki. "Excuse me," he said. "Do not leave here."

We sat and smoked in silence, watching as car after car pulled up and dislodged a knot of soldiers' mothers, Buddhist monks, religious pacifists, or Chechen ladies who had attached themselves to the peace action. What quickly became apparent was that the *Spesnatz* were not turning anyone back, but herding everyone into the general area around Sonia's car and basically creating a detention camp in the middle of the road.

Reaction varied by group. The Chechen women howled and wailed, their cries falling on deaf ears; the Slavic converts to Buddhism staged a sit-in directly in front of the barricades, chanting softly as their leader, a Japanese activist whose name was so impossible to recall he was simply referred to as "monk," tapped on his prayer drum. The religious pacifists—Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, and Quaker—tried in vain to reason with the soldiers, attempting to contact the commanding officer for an explanation about why we were detained.

The one uncontrollable element among the detainees, of course, was the mothers. No sooner were they out of their transport and under "field

arrest" than they fanned out to make contact with their captors. They pestered the arresting soldiers for information about *this* boy from Moscow serving in *that* unit, or *that* boy from the Komi region whose unit had been dispatched to *this* place.

"Any of you know Dima Andropovich Alexanderov?" asked one particularly insistent woman from some town in the Maritime Province of the Russian Far East.

A guard attempted to hold her back from breaking through the security perimeter around a knot of BTRs, but in vain. The woman just had to ask that gunner sitting atop the turret who, indeed it turned out, had once gotten drunk with Dima Andropovich a few weeks ago in Grozny.

With one soldier on board, or glad to see some sort of surrogate mother, the wall broke down, and soon the women were swarming all over the road, notebooks out to record sightings of this conscript or that, to take down greetings, or pass along messages from the folks back home.

"They don't feed you very well around here, do they?" opined one matron, sticking her finger into some draftee's ribs. You could almost hear him groan, "Aw, Mom! Not in front of the guys!"

"Look at this!" scolded another mother, brushing her hand through the filthy locks of another draftee-captor. "Lice!"

Then a group of about two dozen mothers marched squarely up to the concrete blockade and demanded to see the commander who had imposed this shocking and scandalous delay on the Mothers' March. Writhing like a schoolboy, he heard the ladies out: "Shame on you! Have you no mother yourself? No son?"

"I cannot guarantee your safety!" he pleaded.

"What do you mean, 'safety'?" roared an attractive, middle-aged peroxide blonde. "We already have guarantees from the Chechens! If anything should happen to us, it would be at the hands of our own sons—the officers and soldiers of the Russian army!"

It would have been almost funny had it not been growing dark and cold.

Finally, the officer could take no more of the tirade, and called in a wall of men. And they were not conscripts with lice in their hair. They were stern-faced professional soldiers of the OMON forces, the elite (and often motherless) mercenaries known as *kontraktni*, or "contractors." The mothers were shoved back into the monks, and all direct contact between marchers and soldiers banned. Maxim, Sonia's cameraman, tried to clip off a few sequences on the sly—and found himself being manhandled and slapped around by the soldiers who had seemed so friendly moments before.

"Scheisser," said Sonia. "Shit."

Now she was as afraid of losing her own tapes as I was afraid of losing mine.

And then it got nastier, especially for the monks.

A soldier walked up to one of the slavic Buddhists and smashed him in the face. Another monk was dragged to his feet and beaten. "Pacifist traitor, conscientious objector faggot scum!" were some of the terms we could hear in the growing darkness.[11] A flare shot up, illuminating the surrounding fields in an eerie glow—and allowing us to glimpse another beating in progress. Mothers, tired, hungry, exhausted, and now frightened, began to sob from their places on the highway. A pretty Ukrainian girl associated with the religious peaceniks was dragged away, maybe to be raped.

"I don't like this at all," said Sonia.

Neither did I.

Adding to the misery of the moment was the flash, grumble-growl of the seven howitzers, opening up at one-minute intervals in two

---

11 Later I learned that I, too, had allegedly been beaten, tortured, and likely killed in the military detention center at Mozdok. Concern for me was such that Shirvani had breached the lines and traveled to Ingushetia in search of word of my whereabouts and health. Apparently, the shaven pate of one of the monks had been mistaken for my own hairless dome. By further distortion, it is likely that this is how I came to be mistaken for the doomed Fred Cuny, or vice-versa. Cf. Scott Anderson, *The Man Who Tried To Save The World: The Dangerous Life and Mysterious Disappearance of Fred Cuny* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), p. 320.

directions at once: Achkoi Martan and Samashki. We became captive, long-distance witnesses to the slow, methodic destruction of both communities. Sonia Mikich remembered it this way:

"We watch fire destroy the houses where we were met so graciously but hours before. Signal flares rise red and white, expose individual people huddled on the ground. Plumes of smoke rise into the sky. For six hours, until deep into the middle of the night, the soldiers hold us in the bitter ice cold while Samashki is mercilessly bombed and strafed. A brutal tactic. They are terrorizing the civilians because they know so precisely that there are so few fighters inside. The goal is to root out all resistance. A couple of dead and wounded every day, a couple of destroyed houses—exactly enough war as is psychologically required. They are the victors, with overwhelming force. Forty thousand men in an occupied country. Forty thousand victors.

"But tonight, fear comes to the victors. We have overheard how the Russians have ordered up buses and trucks over the radio because they now truly fear that the Chechens will attempt to free the soldiers' mothers. No one is allowed to leave the encircled camp. We are their captives. Two huge bastards beat my cameraman Maxim to the ground and forbid him to film anything more. They seize the notebooks of the other journalists present. Happily, it is so dark that no one gets very interested in the suspicious Thomas Goltz. Maxim tapes up all the red lights on his camera and continues to record what he can, motivated by fury. Myself I am so livid with rage that I have to creep over to a tank in the darkness and vomit next to its treads. Around midnight it is over. The mothers will not reach Grozny. We are shuttled away in a convoy through minefields."[12]

I don't have a lot to add, save a few tiny corrections and a couple of personal notes. We were not watching Samashki houses go up in flames, but those in Achkoi Martan. Samashki was out of sight five kilometers back behind the forest. And as for the business of the Russians being afraid of a Chechen operation to free us, my understanding

12 Cf. Mikich, op. cit. p. 132. Translation from the German is mine.

was quite different and even more menacing (or perhaps just more paranoid). The members of the march—the monks, mothers, Mikich and me—were to be killed, with the deed blamed on Chechen fighters like Hussein and his men. The worst that occurred, however, was the continued beating of the Russian Buddhist monks before we were all trundled off in convoy out of Chechnya.

Flares lit the night.

Multiple, incidental, horrible stops in the middle of multiple nowheres.

Then finally, blissfully, a tarmac road, and then finally, blissfully, a highway—meaning we would not be killed that night. While the rest of the trucks and buses continued on to Vladikavkaz, we peeled off and drove to Sonia's base at Nazran, arriving at three or four in the morning.

My first order of business was to say a prayer for my friends.

The second thing was to accept that drink of whiskey offered by Sonia, and then drink her bottle dry. I had not had a sip for weeks.[13]

In the morning, sitting among the chickens and turkeys while eating a breakfast of toast, eggs, bacon and cheese, all washed down by real coffee and orange juice from the ARD supply stash, I heard the motor sound of an approaching helicopter and surprised myself when I did not duck.

I was out. I was alive. I had my tapes. I had my story.

No. *Our story.*

That was my part of the bargain.

13 Sonia's sole public recollection is that I ruined her beauty sleep by snoring—and thus earned the name she still calls me: *Radio Montana.*

PART THREE



11

GETTING OUT THE NEWS BLUES

That something was sour between myself and my employers at Video News International should have been evident even before I had left Philadelphia nearly three months before. Instead of enticing me to go cover the chaos and confusion of war in the Caucasus with a wad of emergency cash and a decent flak-jacket, my producers had relied more on my reaction to the inference of cowardice when I had expressed reluctance to wander off to war without the requisite equipment—such as cash and Kevlar. The contract between us seemed fraught with legal loopholes that protected them and not me, but in the end I caved and signed it because a war correspondent is not a war correspondent without a war.

Yes, there was bad blood between us. That I knew. But when I stumbled bruised and broke into the ABC office in Moscow, I was not ready for what awaited.

The first surprise was that no one in the ABC office really expected me, mainly due to the fact that I had been declared missing and presumed dead on Russian TV. This was news to me, but of a pleasant kind in the general scheme of things. The second thoroughly unpleasant surprise was learning that there was, in fact, no institutional link or contract between ABC and VNI that obliged the Moscow bureau to do anything for me at all. The night watchman for news, Chris Gehring—later murdered in Kazakhstan—was kind enough to let me sleep on the library floor and use the international line to clear up what I hoped was just some small misunderstanding.

My first call was to the VNI office to tell them I was alive and to brief them on the story I now envisaged for *Nightline*. A portrait of

the Chechen spirit, as seen through Hussein, the bold and no doubt doomed effort to stop the train, the attacks on my muddy little Grovers' Corner town on the north Chechen plain, and the weird and wonderful Mothers' March to save their sons. I even had a working title for the piece—*Devotion*.

"But did you get *bang-bang?*" was the distant producer's first response.

The question was so ridiculous that my answer was probably disproportionate. I do not quite remember; I had been up for nearly forty-eight hours under a bit of stress.

"*Of course I've got fucking bang-bang,*" I probably screamed.

"Ok, ok," came the reply. "Just send in the tapes and we will take a look and see what there is to work with."

"What about the script?"

"Uh, we'll work on that once we've seen the tapes and give *Nightline* a little taste to see if they are interested."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked.

"Well, we have been having some really interesting conversations with Tom Battag and others over there, but haven't sewn up the package deal we want quite yet."

I was stunned. There was, in fact, no *Nightline* contract—only a sort of general expression of interest and intent.

"Well, what about that money you were supposed to have sent me. I had to beg my taxi fare from the night watchman here."

"We are going to have to wait until *Nightline* says yes. So just send the tapes."

"Send me the money you owe me."

"Don't get pushy with me. Just send the tapes."

"Send the money."

It was all down hill from there.

Steve Coppen, the ABC bureau chief, caught me in the hallway coming down from the employee restaurant and my crash pad on the library floor.

"Welcome!" he said. "It must have been tough!"

"Yeah," I said, trying to avoid his eyes and move past him down the stairs. The conversation I had had with Philadelphia the night before had thrown a real monkey wrench into the works of my relationship with ABC, from what I could see. The staff didn't want an outsider like me around in the best of times. And these were not the best of times.

"Look," said Coppen, grabbing me by the elbow and preventing my egress. "I got a message from your people in Philadelphia this morning, these *vee-en-eye* folks. "It was pretty strange. I don't see language like that often. Do you have a problem?"

I did not know Steve Coppen from Adam, aside from the fact that he was the bureau chief of the Moscow office of the TV network for which I was, apparently, not working.

"Yeah," I said. "I have a problem. A big problem."

And I leveled with him. I said that unless I had grossly misunderstood the conversation I had had with Philadelphia the night before, the people who had paid me nothing to go and maybe lose my life in Chechnya were so disappointed in the fact that I was not dead that they had just cut me loose; that not only was there no longer any ABC relationship, but that what had been described to me as a *Nightline* contract was in fact only a *Nightline* "connection." I explained how I was screwed, shafted, and generally left up the proverbial creek without the proverbial paddle, but that none of that was any of his business or responsibility.

"I am sorry for any confusion or misunderstanding I have created," I said. "I'll clear my stuff out within the hour."

"And go where?"

"I have no idea."

"Look," said Coppen, still holding on to my arm. "I have no idea who you really are and what you really do or what you have just done, and I certainly have no idea who these people called *vee-en-eye* are. But I have been around the block a few times myself, and one of the things I know is that you do not throw people out on the street. The library is yours to sleep in; the canteen food is for free; the telephones

are yours to use within reason, and if you need cash, I can front you some of that, too."

"Why?" I asked, stunned.

"I did not like the tone of that twit in Philadelphia calling me at home at five in the morning with instructions to kick you out. This is *my* office."

With some sort of base to work from secured, it was how to get the Samashki material on the air. I had rather a rude awakening. A subdued and short explanation of the "problem" to Ted Koppel's executive producer Tom Battag at ABC *Nightline* D.C. elicited an interesting response. Battag said that while he had the greatest respect for my courage and person, and could and would certainly vote for me when I ran for the papacy, he would not and could not sacrifice a potential long-term relationship with VNI by viewing my Samashki material independent of that agency. ABC's competitors proved even more reluctant to know me. Either through the VNI grapevine, or maybe just the simple protocols of the television news business, it quickly became apparent that, while producers and shooters at CBS, NBC, and elsewhere might have had the highest respect for my courage and endeavor (frequent phrases), no one wanted to look at or consider the work. My entire stock of Samashki tapes was regarded as tainted goods.

Most exasperating was the lack of interest as framed in the rhetorical context of "What is the story?"

"The Chechen story" had been the siege and fall of Grozny and the retreat of the Chechen leadership to the mountains. Then "the Chechen story" had become an interview with Djohar Dudayev, preferably as he hunted bear in the mountains, or possibly a profile of the elusive Shamil Basayev, the diminutive commando leader who had so ripped up Russian armor in the capital and who was now leading the defense of the eastern front from his hometown of Vedeno. "The Chechen story" next became the battle for Fortress Bamut, a former So-

viet missile base in the crotch of the mountains near the Ingushetian frontier, where rumor had it that Djohar Dudayev stashed his alleged nuclear arsenal. This *story* in turn attracted the American humanitarian worker Fred Cuny, whose disappearance and presumed execution then became virtually the *only story* from or about Chechnya that American print and electronic editors were interested in, thanks to the unspoken rule that, unless there was an American at the center of the story, there was no story.

And Samashki? What was that and where was that and why should anyone be interested in a group of guerrillas in a surrounded town in the northern plains of Chechnya that had been under Russian control for the past month or more?

It was maddening, insulting—and finally, enlightening.

"Look at this," said Uncle Larry, thrusting a batch of Reuters news copy at me. "The official news we are picking up and reprinting from official sources suggests your little town is packed with bandits."

"That is bullshit."

"I know it. You know it. But does anyone else, and what do you intend to do about it?"

Uncle Larry, better known as Lawrence Sheets, was an old friend and fellow crisis correspondent during some of the nastier times of the post-Soviet Caucasus. As the Reuters bureau chief in Tbilisi, and with me based in Baku, we had ridden quite a few highways and byways together. Arguably, the low point was the siege and fall of Sukhumi in September 1993.

Sukhumi had been pretty scary, all right—but it was nothing like covering or reporting from Chechnya, which Sheets had been doing for Reuters since the very start of the war. He had been inside Dudayev's presidential apparatus when the first Russian planes attacked, had then become a cellar dweller when the Russian army fought the Chechen resistance for control of the destroyed capital. He was ubiquitous with his satellite telephone, earning himself a reputation for

extreme bravery bordering on a death wish. Taken to task about driving straight through a Russian checkpoint at night despite a blanket ban on crossing armed barriers, he casually replied: "Checkpoint? What checkpoint? That was just some guys with guns standing along the side of the road."[14]

And now he was bored and restless in Moscow and itching to get back into the fray.

"So let's go," said Sheets, sitting in the TV editing suite at the Reuters office in the Raddison-Slavaskaya Hotel, where I was often found hanging around, twiddling thumb.

"Where?"

"Samashki, of course."

"Uncle, I don't have any money. None."

"So, I fund you. Won't cost you a dime."

"Why?"

"Because then I get to tell the boss that you are my minder, to keep me out of trouble."

"I've never kept you out of trouble."

"They don't know that. Not yet, anyway," said Sheets. "Saddle up, cowboy. There's a flight to Nazran tonight."

---

14 A few years later, while a Knight Journalism Fellow at Stanford University, a more sober Sheets penned an article comparing Russian media policy in Chechnya in wars One and Two. Referring to his own antics, he wrote: "I covered the first Chechen conflict from 1994–96 extensively. It was a ridiculously dangerous business. Nineteen of my fellow correspondents, both Russian and foreign, paid for that final story with their lives." Cf. "Russia's Media Policy in Chechnya" in *Contemporary Caucasus Newsletter,* no. 10, Fall 2000.

12

MASSIVNI UBITZVA V SAMASHK (MASS KILLING IN SAMASHKI)

On April 6, a meeting of MVD officers, village elders, the imam and the head of the village administration took place at Post No. 13. Lieutenant General A. Antonov, deputy commander of Russian forces in Chechnya, issued an ultimatum: Hand over, by 7:00 A.M. on April 7, 264 automatic weapons, two machine guns, and one APC (which allegedly appeared on an aerial snapshot of the village) and allow MVD units freely into the village. The Chechen delegation . . . requested to be given three days to attempt to hand over around fifty automatics, but not more. The general refused. Having returned to the village, the leaders and elders gathered village residents and informed them about the ultimatum, but no one brought forth any weapons . . . that day an MVD internal troops division began advancing on the outskirts of Samashki, seeking to strengthen their positions there; but about 1.5 kilometers from the northern end of the village an APC and a tank exploded on mines, and an APC later blew up on a mine on the village outskirts. . . . Shooting on the outskirts of the village had begun long before the ultimatum deadline ran out. Beginning at 10:30 P.M. on the night of April 6, Russian forces heavily bombarded the area outside Samashki with artillery fire until 1:30 A.M. The village was hit with aerial bombardments for twenty-five minutes on the morning of April 7, beginning at 5 A.M. APCs heading toward the village from the north spread cannon fire on Samashki from 7 A.M. to 9 A.M.[15]

---

15 *By All Available Means*, pp. 24–25, based largely on the Akhmad Amaev diaries.

The YAK-40 gently banked to the right, giving passengers on the starboard side of the small, workhorse aircraft a good look at the majestic, shark-tooth range of the Caucasus Mountains.

This is where the Greek gods banished the Titan-turned-traitor, Prometheus, for having stolen Olympian fire as a gift for mankind, chaining him to a rock to have his liver eternally gnawed by birds. The gods had something else in store for mankind—Pandora and her box of evil tricks, including Death, Disease, Pestilence, and Plague. It was curious what was left at the bottom of the box once the punishments had escaped—Hope. The usual theory is that this virtue was left to comfort mankind, although the argument can be made that all Hope does in a useless world is to extend suffering and inevitable despair. Perhaps that complex myth had some relevancy for the complex situation in the Caucasus. But now was not the time to dwell on such literary issues. The pilot had pulled down the flaps and dropped the wheels in preparation for an evening landing at Slepsovski field, not twenty miles, as the crow flies, from Samashki. Were those flashes of artillery fire in the penumbral shadows to the east? Or merely the tinkling of early evening lights and automobile traffic in the Ingush capital of Nazran to the south?

Ingushetia. If it didn't exist, someone would have had to make it up. The mini-state was sort of a warped, post-Soviet world version of Monaco or Andorra, or maybe a Russian Federation clone of West Virginia. But that is really reaching for some sort of comparison when none really exists. Like the origins and meaning of myths and legends of the local giants called Narts and their Titan kinsmen, this is a complex subject and best left for a more reflective day. It was time to focus on the moment. It was the evening of April 6, and Samashki was getting blitzed, and I was on the outside and not the inside.

The aircraft touched down, and taxied toward the extended shack that served as the departure terminal. There was no arrivals section, only a farm truck that pulled up to the luggage bay, and a flimsy security gate separating the airfield from the crowded parking lot. It

was teeming with family members, taxi drivers, hucksters and, no doubt, two dozen spies from both sides of the conflict, taking note of who was coming and going from this obscure piece of asphalt.

Male headgear came in two flavors: the conical lamb's wool *papakhs* and the comical Dudayev fedora. Virtually all women wore spun-wool shawls. Long leather coats dominated for men and women alike, the exception being a couple of western aid workers, dressed in loud purple and orange ski parkas that stuck out ridiculously in this crowd. The evening air resounded with the distant thunder of artillery, a barrage that was more intense than I had ever heard in this war before.

Sheets and I fought off the taxi and transport scalpers and jumped in the Reuters-mobile, a land cruiser driven by Uncle Larry's loyal driver, Nodar. The huge, happy bear of a Georgian had an atrocious accent in Russian, imposing all sorts of Georgian clicks and clacks where those consonants do not exist, and casually disposing of many or most case and declension niceties of the literary tongue spoken in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Traveling with Nodar up from Tbilisi was another Georgian who worked as a cameraman. Sheets suspected he was a secret heroin junkie.

Curiously, perhaps, a good percentage of the correspondents covering the Chechen conflict on a daily basis for various international news organs (with alphabet-souplike acronyms such as AFP, APTV, and WTN) were Georgians or had spent time in that post-Soviet republic. Many, like Sheets and myself, had received their baptisms of fire as war correspondents (or participants) in Abkhazia and had a much higher tolerance for violence than many of their "Western" colleagues. They roosted much closer to the action than the Moscow-based foreigners and aid workers who monopolized accommodations in Nazran, having virtually taken over a small guest house in Slepsovski called the Sundja Hotel. That is where we went, setting up Lawrence's satellite telephone and telex in the walled courtyard for his evening file. The satellite telephone was about as large as a small suitcase, and weighed perhaps fifty

or seventy-five pounds—big, awkward, and expensive. A minute on the phone cost something like fifteen bucks American.[16]

Uncle Larry's file essentially consisted of color copy that allowed Reuters to cheat a dateline close enough to Chechnya to merit attention on their clients' desks. Accordingly, Lawrence pumped Nodar for a few details about the mood among refugees in the Slepsovski market, cadged a despairing quote from the hotel cook, and then wrote a story that emphasized the intensity of the distant bombing and speculated as to the target.

The night's work done, we settled into a meal of borsht and vodka. Then the satellite telephone in the courtyard gave a buzz. It was Reuters Moscow demanding answers to a few questions. The most important concerned the veracity of an Interfax report, carried both on the Channel One state-run television news, as well as the *Segodnya* ("Today") news program on the NTV channel. Both claimed that "Dudayevist fighters," who had previously fought in Abkhazia, had shot and killed seven village elders outside Samashki. The elders, it would appear, had called on the rebels to quit the village, and survivors of the assassination attack were begging Russian Interior Ministry forces to intervene and help them evacuate the town.

Sheets was shocked—and furious. If the stories about the assassination murder were true, he had been sitting no more than twenty

16 While a wondrous device at the time, technology rapidly made the SAT-phone obsolete. The advent of the cell phone in the late 1990s (and then videophones) completely transformed the communications environment in remote areas. But in 1995, reporters were still obliged to stay within range of expensive uplinks through local television stations, such as that at Ingush TV at Nazran. That meant that television crews had to time their days to collect news in Chechnya no later than early afternoon, and then dash back to Nazran to make a shaky feed from the local TV station by midnight, lest their product no longer be "news." The alternative was to make a mad dash back to the Slepsovski airport and beg and bribe passengers to take film to Moscow—a truly nerve-wracking experience for the purveyor of exclusive news, due to the question of whether the courier would really deliver or not. Cf. my article of February 16, 1997 in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled "Uncle Fidel." The original title was "Cigars as Bribes."

miles away from a major development in the Chechnya-at-war story, but without any means of verification.

I was stunned. If true, it meant that the so-called Abkhazian Battalion, under the command of Shamil Basayev, had pounced on Samashki and eradicated the local leadership—or that Hussein and his men were the perpetrators of the killings of the negotiators, a group that would include the imam as well as diarist Akhmad Amaev.

And the *invitation* for the MVD to demilitarize the town by force?

There was nothing to do but drink another long shot of vodka and stare at the ceiling of the Sundja guest house and wait for morning, listening to the constant, distant thunder of heavy artillery. The windows thumped and threatened to shatter, as evil, synthetic sheet lighting lit up the sky until dawn.

It was a rotten night's sleep of no sleep at all.

Dawn, or at least close enough to first light to pass for it, and we were drinking instant coffee, smoking cigarettes, and packing the car. The rival AP and WTN crews had already left, and Lawrence was angry. There was no question where they were off to, and he had extracted a pledge that they would check out this Samashki story together with him. But the competitive edge of the others led them to violate their promise; there would not be much assistance from Lawrence in the future. War is news but news is business.

The big car moved out through the muddy, rutted streets of Slepsovski, passed the market area, and turned left down the side road to Sernovodsk, the ambiguous town on the new border of Chechnya and Ingushetia that was sort of claimed by both and thus served as a sieve for traffic. We ran into the first Russian checkpoint after about a kilometer or two. The fact that Nodar's car had Georgian plates helped: The sergeant in control of the checkpoint was an ethnic Georgian who somehow ended up not only in Russia, but serving in the Russian military. Nodar glad-handed him and slipped him some cigarettes and chocolates and we were let through, not sure if anything illegal had

transpired, but not really caring. We had just entered the "zone of conflict," even if we were only on the apron.

Sernovodsk. Another forlorn Friday market town of walled compounds and one-story buildings built along a byway, which is half the size of a highway, or something close to that. We stopped for bottled mineral water and biscuits and tried to gather some basic information about events of the night before in general, and about events in Samashki in particular. Everyone was incredibly tight-lipped. Maybe they thought that Sheets and I were Russian spies. It was the first time I had felt the real difference of being an outside reporter, as opposed to an insider, and I did not like it.

We proceeded down the main road past the hospital and Friday Mosque, and toward Samashki, some five kilometers away. The road was empty of traffic. A haze of smoke rose in the distance, but it was too far away to determine anything concrete. There was also the sound of distant small arms fire. *Rat-a-tat-tat* and all that.

Over a small rise, and then our path was blocked by a Russian MVD armored vehicle that was completely blocking the road. To its right radio antennas were sticking through camouflage mesh. Closer inspection revealed a network of trenches containing more armor and men, all partially concealed beneath more camouflage mesh. Post 13.

A very blonde Russian youth dressed in a black flak jacket only worn by special forces—the regular Russian grunts wear the more cumbersome green jobbies that carry multiple steel "alligator skin" plates—jumped down from the APC and swung his gun barrel at us. He was wearing Reebok running shoes, or maybe Nikes.

"Davai!" he ordered us, "Clear out, now!"

He was instantly joined by a knot of similarly ill-disposed Russian servicemen.

Lawrence got out of the car and extended his hand, trying to break the ice and reason with the man. But this was one checkpoint he was not going to talk his way across. Further discussion—or a monologue, really—in Lawrence's perfectly fluent Russian (he even knows the word for "phlegm," as opposed to just "spit" or "snot") only served to get the guards to call in their sergeant, who emerged from a nearby

command trench with a smile on his face and a piece of paper and pencil in his hand, noting first our license plate number, and then our names and press affiliations.

"Sorry," he smiled. "You are not on the master list from Mozdok and cannot enter this particular area of the zone of conflict."

"Master list from Mozdok?" Lawrence asked. "But we have our permissions from the Ministry of Defense."

"Sorry," smiled the captain or sergeant. "There is a special operation underway right now, and new permissions are required. You have to go to Mozdok to get it."

Mozdok. The headquarters of the Russian command in the Chechen campaign, and one of the great "filtration" centers. It was at least three hours away by bad road. Lawrence lingered to argue the inanity of our having to go there, but got nowhere. A distant explosion over the blocking APC, and a new plume of smoke from the general direction of Samashki. More distant *rat-tat-tat.* We were at a dead end.

"Did you get it?" Sheets hissed to his cameraman once we were back in the car.

"What?" asked the maybe-junkee sitting in the front of the SUV.

"The post, the sergeant, the explosion and smoke over Samashki!"

"What?"

"*Durak!*" snarled Sheets. "Fool! Why do you think I kept talking?"

Uncle Larry could get mean when he felt deprived of news footage.

The only good news, as it were, was seeing the two cars bearing the AP and WTN television teams heading toward the checkpoint we just left. It seemed they took the wrong road in the morning, and that meant we were ahead of them. We did not bother to stop to tell them what they could expect. Letting them get tied up for an hour or more gave us the time to bag something exclusive, newswise.

Competition, and all that.

Back through Sernovodsk. Back through Slepsovski. Back down the main highway to Nazran, with a cut right at Karabuk, and up and

over the Sundja Hills via very bad and muddy roads to Mozdok via the back door. The hills were starting to take on a veneer of green, with splashes of wildflower erupting in yellows, reds, and blues here and there. Spring in the Caucasus. Shepherds drove their sheep; vicious dogs attempted to attack the car; an outdoor market in the middle of nowhere was specializing in automotive parts; a hippodrome of sorts was tucked between two hills, with a horse race game called *jirit* underway. All of this would have made lovely B-roll footage for a documentary feature on the region, or even one on the weirdness of life-goes-on-as-normal-in-the-midst-of-war. But we did not have the time nor inclination to stop. The Novosti news program on Channel One was carrying a report, sourced to the military, of MVD forces conducting a "mop up" operation in the area of Samashki. Russian losses were reported as sixteen killed and forty wounded. The fighting must have begun just after we had left the Post 13 checkpoint on the distant western fringe of the town. I thought of all the point positions I knew of on the Samashki periphery, the gun pits and slit trenches—and their occupants. I was sick at heart of it all, but mainly sick at heart for *not being there.*

Lawrence was sick, too.

He was sitting in the backseat of an SUV Reuters-mobile with a driver and a cameraman and guide (me), all going in the wrong direction.

"That is bullshit news," he announced to all of us, but mainly to himself. "Nothing but propaganda."

I only hoped he was right.

Finally, Mozdok—another drab farm town in the Russian North Caucasus, but one situated in the pro-Russian minirepublic of North Osetia, that now calls itself Alanya. Most of its citizens claimed descent from some proto-Persian stock, and that Josef Stalin is (or was) one of their number. Aside from total loyalty to the concept of "Russia" for a century or two, not a lot distinguished Alanya from its various North Caucasian neighbors. It was rural; it was a dump. As for Mozdok, its main distinguishing characteristic was that it sup-

ported a large military base and was filled with soldiers and their equipment. That, in turn, meant the roads were worse than elsewhere: Tank treads are not gentle on asphalt, nor the huge rubber wheels of the Soviet-style APCs.

We flashed our papers to the guards at the entrance to the base and were duly registered according to name, vehicle registration, and Defense Ministry press pass. We sought out the public affairs office to acquire the new permission papers, watching helicopters land and take off for Chechnya and trucks arrive to be loaded with boxes of ammunition. Behind our every step was the thought that somewhere on this base was the notorious "filtration" center that served as the torture factory for young Chechen men, such as the man named Vakha I had interviewed that first night in Samashki so many centuries ago. You could almost smell the evil, but never see it. *This* warehouse? *Those* railway cars?

But if the torturers and their victims were not to be seen, neither was anybody else who might issue the new, special passes allegedly required to make a legal foray into Samashki. After an hour or two of getting shuffled from one office to the next, we decided we were wasting our time. Two hours later we were back in Slepsovski, and a half hour later parked in front of the APC blocking the road to Samashki in front of Post 13.

This time, we were not alone. In addition to the APTV and WTN rivals, and a couple of other reporters drawn to the Samashki story like flies to fresh manure, I noticed an empty yellow bus flying a white flag. Next to it stood a man best described as Jesus-when-he-got-old, whose white beard and general mien suggested he was a Russian peacenik. He and the bus were there to go in and pick up the wounded. But no one was coming out.

Once again, we could hear the distant *rat-a-tat-tat* of small arms fire, often punctuated by the deeper *bomb-boom* of cannon or mortar. Smoke billowed from a dozen distant fires, merging into a single grayish haze over the town before merging with the enveloping dusk.

"I would truly like to allow you to go down the road, but it is simply

too dangerous," smirked the baby-faced sergeant or captain who had sent us to Mozdok that morning. "I have to guarantee your security, but I cannot. Even we do not know what is going on in there."

Sheets and I discussed the idea of calling the officer on his words and taking security on our own shoulders. It was a crazy notion—but then again, we had done crazy things before. Then the blonde OMON man in the Reebok or Nike sports shoes we had encountered that morning came rushing at us, screaming. Actually, he was addressing the Russian peacenik wearing the long white beard.

"Why do you human rights–loving pacifist creeps care so much for these Chechen dogs!" he howled. "They are cutting off the legs and arms and heads of every one of our boys they capture, and sticking them in garbage cans!"

"Did you see that?" asked Lawrence.

"I don't need to see it!" shouted Reebok Nike. "I know it's true!"

I tried to imagine the men charged with such atrocities, men like Xamid, Shirvani, Ussam, Ali, and Hussein. It was impossible that they would do such things. But the little episode decided the matter for us. Even if we made the drive into Samashki at our own risk, we would probably never come out. Either we would be mistaken for Russian soldiers and be drawn and quartered along the lines alleged, and then made into tomorrow's headlines, or we were being lured into a trap by the Russians, who would kill us out of general spite and then blame our deaths on Chechens like Hussein.

If he was still alive.

More Deep Purple acid rock from atop the APC blocking the road. It seemed to be the only tape the Russian grunts had. I would have offered them a change of tunes, but we only had one tape, too—a collection of Elton John's incredibly overorchestrated *Greatest Hits,* which I got so tired of hearing that I banned Nodar from playing it while I was in the car. The Georgian driver was in a good mood. He had been trained to wait, and was getting combat pay. The cameraman was less happy. Either he was going through withdrawal, or he was

expressing his frustration at not being able to shoot anything by sinking into a sustained funk and complaining about fever and stomach disorders. As for Uncle Larry, he was getting news-edgy.

"This is going nowhere, fast," said Sheets after sitting around Post 19 for several hours. "Let us try the back door, if there is one."

Reluctantly, I acceded. I wanted to wait, but it wasn't my car. I was not even paying for my own bed in the shabby Hotel Sundja. I was there on sufferance. I had no rights, only friends.

We drove back down the empty road to Sernovodsk, inquired about a back road to Samashki, and were directed through the muddy streets of the town to a deeply rutted farm track snaking along the edge of a line of trees that serve as a windbreak. I wanted to believe the path was somehow connected to the abandoned water mill of Hussein's youth. Maybe it was or maybe it wasn't. We turned back when we noticed a red sign with a white skull and words in Russian that suggested very clearly that the area was mined.

Back to and through Sernovodsk and toward Slepsovski to another road Lawrence identified on his map. It went in the wrong direction, toward Achkoi Martan via the tiny settlements of Davydenko and Novi Sharoi, and was very likely the same bad road I took with Sonia Mikich and her ARD crew that nasty night when we and the monks and mothers were convoyed out of the region. In other words, it might theoretically lead to Samashki, but also it had been under Russian control for weeks.

I tried to explain this to Uncle Larry, but he would not listen and told Nodar to drive on. Then, within a mile of the turnoff west, we were stopped at a Russian guard post. A pack of cigarettes convinced the guards to let us continue down the bad track, allegedly to interview a garrison commander based at Davydenko.

"Be careful," said the guard. "There are rebels in the forest."

Driver Nodar snapped on his flak jacket, then slipped a ceramic shock plate in the front envelope of the jacket. Then he took the back pocket plate and sat on it as protection against mine blast. Sheets and I reversed the order. We were sitting in the backseat, so we wore one plate in the back against bullets and sat on the second for protection

against mines. *Ha-ha,* we laughed. The maybe-junkie cameraman in the passenger seat up front snoozed or slumped in his no-dope-related haze.

Davydenko consisted of a couple of houses near the road. The Russians had set up a tent camp and canteen in between the houses. Soldiers were everywhere. The maybe-junkie cameraman managed to shoot a few useless frames before being told to stop. We were led in quasi-arrest over to the local commander, a genial enough man from Perm, or some other obscure Russian city, who politely informed us that we had no business being in his sector, and to turn back the way we came. He added that, if instructed from above, he would be more than happy to host us and allow us to record a day-in-the-life of the regular soldiers under his command, as per his request. As for his assessment of the situation, well, all seemed rather quiet and under control, although that of course could change at any moment. Particularly worrisome were the mines the enemy placed on the road at night, obscuring them in pooled water and muddy tracks. We returned to Sernovodsk sitting on both ceramic shock plates and avoiding all pooled water and deep muddy tracks.

The situation at Post 13 was the same as before. "Smoke on the Water" ringing through the air, and silent smoke vectoring over Samashki in the distance. Other hacks were arriving on the scene. Chris Bird, of the wire service, and Paula Robatelle, a producer for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, French-language division. Next arrived two cars filled with a very pushy team from the British Channel 4, working on a general documentary on the war in Chechnya. They had just sort of stumbled onto the Samashki story without knowing what it was. Like everyone else, they were told they could not enter Samashki without the new special permissions issued in distant Mozdok. We told them of our experience, but they all decided to take the drive anyway.

The small crowd of newshounds staking out the distant town had

the effect of creating a diversion, and the camera operators and wandering journalists instinctively started to act in silent collusion with one another, distracting soldiers while semisecretly filming the APC in the middle of the road, as well as elements of life in the camp trenches. *Ha! A soldier on top of a bunker washing his hair! Ho! A blonde woman in fatigues emerging from the camp mess with a tray of steaming tea!*

News . . .

Noodle dinner. Vodka and Turkish beer. The nightly pounding of some Chechen settlement or position by the Russian artillery. One thing was clear; it was no longer Samashki they were pulverizing. Probably Bamut, as Achkoi Martan had surrendered, the head of the Russian-appointed administration, Salman Khadjiev, had announced.

News . . .

"The desk wants some real copy," said Lawrence after checking in with Moscow via his SAT-phone. "And they want some pictures to go with it."

"What does that mean?"

"I am going to Grozny," said Sheets. "Come along. We'll try to be back by late afternoon."

"Ok," I said, heartsick. I felt that I was abandoning my people.

At the crack of dawn on the morning of April 9 we were pulling out of Slepsovski for Sernovodsk. Up and not so much over the Sundja Hills as along them, we drove down a sometimes dusty and other times muddy farm road that had become the main connecting road to the Mozdok–Grozny highway. It was a bone-rattling ride, until we finally hit asphalt. The main highway was still a pretty bumpy drive, due to deep holes and craters and the general destruction of tarmac-chewing tank treads. Every hamlet and house along the way seemed to have been shattered by aerial bombs or point-blank artillery fire.

I asked Nodar to stop so I could film some generic destruction.

"Don't bother," said Lawrence. "You'll get enough in Grozny."

This was an understatement. Starting with the outskirts of the city, Grozny was such a shattered mess that it boggled the mind. "Destruction not seen in Europe since Stalingrad," was the usual way to describe it. Gutted, pockmarked, ten-story apartment buildings sagged like ugly Leaning Towers of Pisa, long emptied of their erstwhile residents. Less mauled, but still virtually destroyed structures suggested continued life through messages scrawled on exterior walls: *Don't Shoot! People Live Here!*

We rolled up the windows as we passed through the industrial zone, once home to the Chechen oil refineries, but now only the source of the thick black smoke that hung over the city like an evil cloud. Flames shot out of natural gas pipes at every intersection. The empty shells of heavy ordnance lay everywhere, as did the twisted wrecks of cars, trucks, tanks, and APCs.

The impression of vast, gratuitous destruction and carnage was only underlined and framed by the weirdly ordinary. There were blossoms on the trees, beer and candy salesladies on virtually every street, and paddleboats gliding across the city's reservoir, its filtration and delivery system long since bombed into rubble. Long lines formed at wells to fill milk containers and other vessels with dubiously clean drinking water, shuffled to basement "homes" via pushcarts.

But the strangest thing was that everyone was smiling.

Smiling.

They would not take the smiles off their faces, no matter what they had to say.

"Shock," said Sheets succinctly.

One of those smiling people we met was Tzutzayen Hampash, age twenty-nine, who owned or managed or had taken control of a restaurant near the reservoir. There were no doors or windows and no kitchen, really—just part of the building where Mr. Hampash kept a coal fire burning both for heat as well as to grill his kebabs.

"How are things?" asked Lawrence.

"Couldn't be worse!" smiled Hampash.

We culled a few operational details. Hampash first opened on January 12, shortly before the fall of the city. It was not clear whether he aimed to serve approaching Russian troops or retreating Chechen guerrillas, and we thought it indiscreet to ask. Then a renewed onslaught, coupled with the Ramadan fast, forced a new closure for most of February, but Hampash had reopened on March 14, and business had been pretty good since. He had sixteen customers that very day. We declined to be the seventeenth and eighteenth. Our decision had nothing to do with money or the lack thereof. Roving packs of dogs were eating corpses throughout the city, and we were worried about where Hampash got his meat. Our concern may have been legitimate in the abstract, but it was dumb and downright unfriendly in the concrete circumstances at hand. *Hampash was open.*

We drove to the city center.

Or what was left of it.

The gutted, blackened, and pockmarked presidential executive building still stood on the main square and represented a recognizable monument for general orientation, as well as the backdrop for victory photographs being shot (via the new Polaroid camera craze) by the roving units of Russian troops in town. A Russian flag blew in the breeze above the building like some warped reminder of the Soviet banner flying atop the Berlin *Reichstag* in 1945, as if the conquest of the two cities were equal in martial glory in Russian eyes. Curiously, that same red banner of the defunct USSR flew from the flag masts atop any number of APCs prowling the town on patrol.

I took a picture of Lawrence in front of the presidential building and he took one of me. Then we were interrupted by the warnings of a demolition team about to raze the building across the square that had once served as the local parliament, or council of ministers, I forget which. We stood our ground and trained our cameras on the building.

Boom, went the charge. *Crash*—the five-story structure came tum-

bling down, filling the square with dust. To look at the pictures we took, it might appear we were at ground zero when the bombs went off.

We sought out various locations that meant something to us, like the French House hotel. *Destroyed.* Then the Mona Lisa restaurant. *Crushed.* A private family home where Lawrence had stayed during the siege. *Obliterated.* Finally, we drove over to the guest house where Zviad Gamsakhurdia had set up his Georgian government in exile after his ousting from power in Tbilisi in 1992, and where his remains were reinterred during my first visit to the city in February 1994. It was difficult finding the place, due to lack of familiar reference points. The two-story building was half blown away, and the interior walls were exposed. The Georgian Apostolic cross marking Zviad's grave, however, was still in place, even if shrapnel-hacked and scarred. Nearby was the memorial to the Deportations of February 23–24, 1944. The commemorative plaques had been blasted off the walls and the ancient cemetery was completely destroyed by bombs, or more likely, given the dearth of craters, Russian soldiers who had used the evocative sight for target practice. But in the middle of the holy rubble stood the stone Quran, unscathed—down to the green cloth "page marker" resting on the *Surat An-Nas.*

> *"Awuzzu fi Rabb an Nas*
> *Malik an Nass . . ."*
> I seek refuge in the Lord of Man
> The King of Man . . ."

"Let us see if we can interview Khadjiev," Lawrence suggested, and we made our way through the rubble-filled streets to a compound housing the Grozny city administration that served as the seat of government for the Moscow-appointed administration.

Security was high. The outer streets were lined with APCs, the entrance was strung with barbed wire between concrete sentry posts, manned by shaven-faced Russian youths in alligator-plate flak jackets

holding back vicious guard dogs. All windows were draped with anti-grenade netting, and snipers prowled the roof.

"We have an interview with Comrade Salman," Uncle Larry told the guards, lying. Remarkably, we were escorted inside. Word passed from secretary to secretary and even more remarkably, we were soon escorted into the presence of the man regarded by virtually all nationalists as the ultimate *predatl*, or traitor, a man who had accepted the mantle of Chechen leadership from the blood-tainted Russian hand—Salman Khadjiev.

In the flesh, however, the former Minister of Chemical Industry in the Russian Federation was a surprisingly frank and friendly individual whose main motivation for assuming the unsavory position of Russian-appointed interim leader of Chechnya was his deep and personal loathing of General Djohar Dudayev, whom he repeatedly compared with Hitler. While Lawrence's questions were wide-ranging indeed, I only had one, and I saved it for the end of the interview. It concerned what was happening at Samashki.

"I don't know," he said after a long silence. "No one knows. They will not tell us."

Back along the *Trasa*, or main Grozny–Mozdok highway, Lawrence told me he wanted to file the Khadjiev interview as a television news feed, backed up by the generic pictures of wanton destruction in Grozny. None of it was really news, but it was better than nothing, and somehow it justified his presence in the region.

"Post 13," I pleaded, as we started our descent into Sernovodsk.

"It's a waste of time," said Sheets.

"Five minutes," I begged.

Uncle Larry relented and told Nodar to turn left and not right at the Sernovodsk Friday Mosque, and we trundled out the four or five miles to the Post 13 checkpoint blocking access to Samashki. The crowd on our side of the APC had grown, augmented by even more Canadian reporters, who seemed to take a greater interest in the Sa-

mashki story than all the American publications with Moscow-based correspondents combined. They were led by Elizabeth Ward of the *Toronto Star,* and also included Geoffrey York of the *Globe and Mail,* as well as Jennifer Gould, a Canadian writing about the disappearance of Fred Cuny for the *Village Voice.* There were more Russians gathered at Post 13, too. The yellow bus of Old Jesus had been augmented by a couple of cars festooned with the markings of the Russian Emergency Services Ministry, an institution with strong military links that still serves as a sort of local Red Cross, as well as a vehicle very clearly marked with the logo of the International Committee for the Red Cross itself. A French, or perhaps Belgian woman sitting in the front seat was having an animated discussion through a translator with our baby-faced sergeant with blonde hair and Nike sneakers. The subject was Russia's obligations as a member and signatory of the Geneva Conventions, and subsequent protocols, to allow the ICRC access to anywhere it wanted to go. But the sergeant just smiled and shook his head and evoked his mantra about "orders from Mozdok."

Then the situation got a lot nastier.

A cropped-haired man named Alexandr Guryanov, representing the Russian human rights group *Memorial,* an organization founded in the hallowed name of Andrei Sakharov, announced his presence with a speech.

"Let me say this quite clearly, in front of these young Russian soldiers," Guryanov intoned. "Events in Samashki, a defenseless town and surrounded by the overwhelming force of the Russian Army, can only be described as an attempted genocide."

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the blond Special Forces kid in the black flak jacket and Reebok or Nike sneakers was in Guryanov's face.

"The genocide is of the Russian soldiers who fought for our country!" he snarled. "You want to talk genocide, *that is your genocide!*"

I pulled out my camera to document a little tension at the checkpoint, but then felt a hand on my arm.

"You foreign correspondents all seem to like wearing your fancy

flak jackets, as if you were afraid we were going to shoot you," smirked a wiry gentleman with officer bars on his arms—captain, major, or colonel, I really couldn't say. "Why are you so concerned? But just for fun, let's see what your Western, NATO stuff really absorbs, shock-wise."

All the Russian grunts chortled. Their commander was looking at us all, everyone sporting a blue flak jacket. Then he was looking at me and raising his gun.

Keep cool, I said to myself, flipping. *Dance on thin ice, now . . .*

"Point blank?" I said, scoffing. "Let's see what you can do from one hundred meters."

One, two, three, four, five . . . I started counting off steps, stripping the Velcro snaps off the blue flak jacket as I went. *Just get it off and let him shoot it out of my hand!*

At one hundred paces, I propped the jacket up in the weeds like a target, relieved—and furious with myself, the gunman, and the world.

One, two, three, four, five . . .

"Are you insane? That shock plate is worth five hundred dollars!" hissed Sheets.

He was furious and had a right to be. I left my ABC-owned body armor in Moscow, and I was wearing Reuters' flak gear.

Plung!

The officer whacked my flak jacket from one hundred yards, then sent a grunt to collect it for our inspection. The bullet had smashed into the lower left-hand area of the chest plate. A liver shot. Fatal, perhaps, had it not been for the ceramic Kevlar plate. It actually had stopped the slug, although anyone wearing the jacket during impact would have been extremely uncomfortable, with shattered ribs, bruised guts, and likely internal bleeding. At the very least, the wearer would have become temporarily incapacitated in the way that folks get immobilized when punched in the solar plexus.

More to the point, the five hundred dollar ceramic shock plate was ruined. Hairline cracks emanated from the impact hole, reaching at least into the center. Its integrity had been destroyed with one relatively low-impact round from an AK-47 at one hundred yards. The

next bullet would have just gone straight through. *Stop the war, I want to get off.*[17]

Laurence Sheets was seething.

"You fuck!" he screamed. "How am I going to explain this to Reuters?"

Not bothering to suggest that maybe I had literally taken the flak for our whole group, I managed to say that if the ceramic chest plates were one-timers, then perhaps they were overrated as protection.

"It stopped that bullet, ass!" shouted Uncle Larry.

"And the second?" I asked rhetorically.

"That's not the point!"

"It *is* the point," I loudly suggested. "Am I supposed to stand up and ask everyone to stop shooting while I change plates?"

The Russian grunts chortled. Having two foreign journalists screaming at each other in front of everyone was better fun than having almost just shot one.

A helicopter landed, kicking up dirt. A much-epauletted officer got off and scuttled over to the base. General Antonov, perchance? No telling, but at least some good visual action. Takeoff, landing, and menacing overflight. It soon got better.

Distantly, down the road and to the left, at the base of the Sundja Hills, came the dust devils. One, two, five, ten. Growing. Tanks. Lots of them. A whole column. Crossing the road. Now on the right side,

---

17 Years later, at a Special Forces school in Florida, I was treated to a shooting display, including a demonstration of what types of shock plate in the modern American flak jacket can withstand what kind of shot from what kind of range. At the end of the program, we guests were invited to inspect the target vests, and most folks were mightily impressed with the absorptive powers of the fancy Kevlar ceramic plates. Not wanting to ruin everyone's fun, I took one of the SF guys aside and asked about second-shot integrity. "We don't use this shit in the field," he admitted. "It's too heavy and limits your ability to roll out of the way when you need to. The only folks we think need to wear it are Secret Service guys guarding the president, so they can leap in the way and take that one shot. After that, the vest is toast."

moving toward the Post 13 trenches, and beyond. A dozen APCs; no, a score or more. A dozen howitzers and at least that many T-72 and T-83 battle tanks. And kitchen trucks, and jeeps, and ammunition wagons. The turrets and aprons of all vehicles were crowded with grunts dressed in Rambo-black, pirate scarves cinched around their foreheads, sitting beneath the red hammer and sickle flag of the defunct USSR, instead of the Russian tricolor. An army was on the move.

I put my camera down on its tripod at an angle that would capture the armor as it rolled by the base. A tidal wave of dust started to float over us until it obscured virtually everything. The only way to track the column was to try and see where the dust started and stopped.

"And now, Bamut," I heard one of the grunt guards chuckle to another mate.

"What unit is that?" I asked.

"Three-sixty-sixth, I think," said one of the grunts.

The 366th. That was the unit held responsible for the massacre at Xodjali in Azerbaijan back in 1992, when the Karabkah Armenians decided to make an example out of that little town, killing nearly a thousand souls.

Distracted by the column, no one else seemed to notice the car coming down the road from Sernovodsk under a white flag. It pulled up in front of the APC and two elderly men got out. To all the other journalists gathered around, the pair probably just looked like local farmers. To me, they looked like ghosts. One was Lema Abdulkhajiev, the head of the local administration in Samashki, a man I did not know well. The other was Akhmad Amaev, the Samuel Pepys of Samashki. Both were supposed to be dead, killed along with the other elders on the night of April 6, in one of the acts the Russian command used to justify the attack on the town. Something was very wrong.

Throwing off all protocols learned in my time in Samashki concerning respect of youth toward age, I rushed over to greet Amaev. He was as stunned to see me as I him.

"We have been used, horribly used!" he hissed. "We are all alive!"

Sheets was at my side; I quickly brought him up to speed.

"I must go," said Amaev, trying to break away. "I have to negotiate

with these *animals* about getting out the wounded, the women and children."

"You must tell the world the truth, that you are alive."

"I must go."

"You *must* tell us, and on camera. For the sake of the truth and history."

The soldiers atop the APC were absorbed in something else—the magnificence of the armored column that just rolled by, the gaggle of foreign correspondents and aid workers on the far side of the vehicle, or maybe just the fourth playing of "Smoke on the Water" on their cassette player. I covered Sheets as he turned his camera on Amaev.

"In return for the demilitarization of the town and our allowing the armored train to pass through, [General] Antonov agreed that we would be allowed a self-appointed police force of twenty men, and that no Russian troops would enter the town," the diarist said in a hushed voice. "As a token of good faith we delivered eight assault rifles and brought them here. But that same night Antonov changed his mind and delivered a new ultimatum: We would find and deliver 264 more weapons or face the storming of the town. We were frantic, because there were not 264 weapons to be collected, and most of the fighting men had already left the town for the forest. We managed to collect another sixteen weapons—but by then the bombing had already begun. Everything else is a lie, a lie!"

"How many dead?"

"Hundreds, I don't know. Women and children mainly, and elders."

"And your son's commander, Hussein?" I asked.

Amaev looked at me oddly.

"I must go," said Amaev, and was gone.

It started as a trickle. It never became a flood. Just slow and periodic waves of people, trudging toward us down the road from Samashki, past the APC and Post 13, toward Sernovodsk. Ancient men in their *papakhs* and leather boots, silent, broken, followed by knots of weep-

ing women, mud-stained and dirty, carrying bundles that were or had been children. Older kids held white flags, and sometimes smiled.

"Bodies, bodies, everywhere!" screamed a woman of perhaps twenty, the only person to break down in front of the spectators at Post 13, journalists and soldiers alike. *"Children, women, aged!"*

I searched among the faces of the survivors until I found someone I knew. She arrived in the person of Bekhist Abdulayeva, a lady who lived near the red brick house that served as a frontline sniper's nest. I barely recognized her for the grime and exhaustion and trauma scratched over every surface of her face.

"Toms," she sighed, seeing me, reaching for me.

"Get in the car," I said commandeering someone's vehicle—that of Voice of America correspondent Elizabeth Arnold? It was difficult to recall. The main point was that it did not seem wise to hear about the slaughter in Samashki in front of all the Russian grunts.

"When the bombardment began, we hid in the cellar," croaked Bekhist as we sped toward Sernovodsk, relating to me for the first time what would become a monotonous mantra of murder. "Then the soldiers came in, laughing and swearing and shooting at anything that moved. I pleaded with them to spare us, telling them that there were no militants or young men with us in the basement, but they threw in their 'lemons' anyway."

A lemon is a fragmentary hand grenade.

Bekhist could not recall the day her house was destroyed, because the wave of assault seemed to ebb and flow and night became confused with day. Nor did she know what had happened to her children, who had disappeared during the course of the attack.

"Tell me the same thing, but in Chechen," I urged her, setting up my camera in front of the mosque at Sernovodsk. I am not sure if she gave a more elaborate version of events but she was soon surrounded by a wall of local residents and refugees who were openly weeping—and Chechens do not cry. Bekhist paused, looked around at the world as if for the last time, and then slumped to the ground. I thought she died of a heart attack, but she had only fainted dead away.

Whatever she said, however, created near panic. Men were running to their cars, pulling onto the road to race toward Post 13 and, I presume, Samashki.

"Stoi!! Stoi!! Stoi!!" someone was shouting in Russian at the top of his lungs. "The soldiers will think you are attacking and shoot to kill.' "

I will take credit for that stunningly obvious piece of advice.

I was changing roles. It was time to work to save my friends, not interrogate them.

I don't know how many bus runs I made that day, up and back from the Sernovodsk mosque and back to Post 13, picking up the small waves of women and children and elders who had managed to march away from Samashki under white flags. The young men were not so lucky. A small unit of soldiers, most likely FSB (KGB), intercepted the new refugee survivors about one hundred yards before they reached Post 13, winnowing out virtually all males between the ages of fifteen and fifty, stripping them in the field to check for the telltale bruise marks on their shoulders that would suggest they were fighters, and then tying their hands behind their backs and forcing them aboard trucks headed for the notorious "filtration" center at Mozdok.

The testimony of all the women and elders I spoke with was identical.

The town had been utterly sold out. Blasted to bits on the night of the sixth and morning of the seventh, it was next subjected on the days of the seventh and eighth to a massacre by marauding soldiers, most, if not all of whom were allegedly doped up on a pain-killing, brain-deadening, rampage-inducing cocktail of promodol, dimedrol, and booze.[18] There were somewhere between one hundred and two hundred dead.

That sounded like news to me. And it sounded like news to all the

---

18 Evidence of widespread drug use among the Russian assault troops came in the form of chemical analyses of the trace elements left in the scores, nay, hundreds of syringes found in the streets of the town by *Voice of America* correspondent

other correspondents now in the area, their numbers growing by the hour. But it did not sound like news to any of the press organs with which I maintained an association.

"We want pictures of the dead, not allegations from the living!" said one best-nameless editor to whom I had pitched the massacre story via Sheets' sat-phone.

Uncle Larry was filing another update, based on the testimony of my friends. He managed to convince a young Chechen woman named Xazman Umanova to take his camera into Samashki beneath her skirt and shoot everything she saw. Xazman had done so, but the material was so out of focus that it was unusable.[19] He took her eyewitness testimony instead. The AP got their own clutch of quotes from survivors, as did the AFP, VOA, and everybody else. Everyone was filing, filing, filing about Samashki.

The only person not filing was me.

Vodka that night. Gallons of it.

The crowd around the Sernovodsk mosque has grown to several thousand.

Alisutanova, Tamusa Magomedovna; Amirkhanov, Alvi Adamovich; Arsaev, Arbi Zalimkhanovich . . . reads Alexandr Guryanov from a list of names somehow compiled by Memorial under chaotic circumstances. It is not clear whether this is a list of the living or the dead.

Elizabeth Arnold. Even more interesting was a subsequent report by the Gorbachev Foundation that described the use of self-hypnosis video programs by crack assault troops that were basically designed to leach the last taint of human kindness from soldiers' souls prior to an attack. The author does not have a direct citation for the report, but I had it in my hands and recall that it appeared in the *Moscow News* or *Moscow Times* sometime in mid- or late April 1995.

19 Umanova would improve with time, winning the "Stringers' Choice" award in the annual Rory Peck Commemoration in 2000 for her incredibly brave coverage of the second Chechen war; she is now in exile.

"Brothers and sisters, the world must know of the deeds of Samashki!" sings Zinzie Terazawa, the leader of the wandering order of Russian Buddhists that call themselves Nipponsan Mihotse.

"Let Clinton, Major, Kohl, and Mitterand come to Samashki for their summit!" demands Maria Kirbasova, the head of the Soldiers' Mothers' movement, referring to the upcoming May 9 Victory Day celebrations in Moscow marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Allies' victory over Hitler.

The monks and mothers and other attendant Russian religious pacifists, as well as Chris Hunter and the Quakers are back, planning a chant-march-*zikr* down the road from Sernovodsk to Samashki, breaching the barrier at Post 13.

They march. We march. We are them and they are us, Orthodox Jew silent marching, *zikr*-dance Muslim ecstatic chanting, Buddhist drum-beating. One hundred yards from the barrier, the colonel who used my flak jacket for target practice and the baby-faced sergeant come out to greet us with a dozen soldiers with their guns at the ready.

Halt, they say. We do. A discussion ensues; the marching mood dissipates; another wave of refugees trudges around the far side of the APC. And then a white land cruiser with the markings of the International Committee of the Red Cross is driving toward us, coming from Samashki. It stops at the barrier.

Odd.

Jean-Paul Corbaz, director for the North Caucasus region of the ICRC, gets out. Talking to the cameras, he explains how he has just been taken on a tightly controlled tour of Samashki, after previously having been refused access on multiple occasions by the Russian high command.

"There are many ways to take a town in accordance with the rules of war," Corbaz says carefully. "By all indications, this was not the case in Samashki."

That tightly worded statement is a complete break with the ICRC policy of never sharing anything in the field with the press. It is a

virtual condemnation of the Russian high command, and a war crime inference.

That is news.

Not without bodies, say all the editors I petition.

Vodka that night. Buckets of it.

13 WITNESS

The true scale of the tragedy that struck the Chechen settlement of Samashki on April 12 [April 7–8, ed.] *will be revealed at a later date, but even now it is clear that it can be equated with Lidice, Khatyn, and Son My."*[20]

"Silence hung over Samashki today. Everywhere, it seems, there were bodies."[21]

"They are pulling me," said Uncle Larry, hanging up his sat phone. "They say there is nothing more we can do with this story without real pictures."

This was extraordinarily bad news. Lawrence was my car, my phone, my rent. Without Sheets, I had no resources. But however frustrating, I had to admit that I was about to give up, too. I'd been burning up a lot of time at fifteen dollars a minute on Uncle's satellite phone, trying to get someone, anyone, interested in the Samashki massacre story, but with no results. No bodies, no story, said everyone I ever worked for, and I was getting a little tired racing to the Slepsovski airport every evening to beg or bribe pilots or passengers to courier the tapes I shot that day to the ABC Moscow bureau in the vain hope that they would use something.

---

20 Dmitry Balburov, *Moscow News Weekly*, English edition, No. 15, April 21–27, 1995.

21 Gillian Findley, *ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, April 12, 1995.

"Let's just make one last run."

"I just don't get the point any more," said Sheets. "We have done this story to death."

"Please."

Back through the muddy streets of Slepsovski down to the market, over the bridge left then right toward Assinovskaya before jagging left again down the tree-lined road to Sernovodsk. There was Memorial's Alexandr Guryanov at the mosque, a mass of people gathered around him as he continued to read from his list of dead or living. A couple of the monks associated with the Soldiers' Mothers' March were chanting at the corner of the field, attracting the listless attention of several more newly arrived journalists. Sheets and I drove on, pausing to take keepsake pictures of each other under a poster of Djohar Dudayev someone had nailed to a telephone pole. The banner underneath read: *Freedom or Death!*

Next came Post 13.

But there was something different, something wrong.

There was no APC blocking the road.

We stopped where the APC should have been and went to the Post canteen to find our baby-faced sergeant. He was drinking tea with a plump peroxide blonde dressed in camouflage.

"Well?" he asked us. "What do you want?"

"You know what we want. The same thing we have wanted for almost a week."

"So? Who's stopping you? Not me."

We got back in the car. Maybe we put up a white flag or tidied up the tape on the windscreen that spelled out *PRESS* in reverse. And then we were driving into Samashki, and even Uncle Larry was incapable of coming up with a gallows joke.

The first body was that of a man lying in the mud outside a house at 102 Stepnaya Street. He was dressed in a red vest with a plaid lining on the inside of his coat, partially covered by a green blanket with a white floral pattern. I might have known him, but could not tell due to his shattered face. Lawrence and I sucked up our guts and moved on.

"I don't know what to say, I just do not know what to say," said a familiar-looking grandfather, keening in the shattered remnant of his home. "They came and they killed us like we were animals, and then did not even allow us to bury our dead. What can I say?"

His son had been killed right in front of him

A young mother almost deranged with grief, described how a tank had barged through the gate of her parents' home and then started blasting away at point-blank range. Her father tried to hide in the oil pit of the family garage, but had been found, dragged out and doused with gasoline and then set afire before her eyes. She did not know how her mother and brother were killed; she just buried them in the garden along with her father, a week after having planted the spring onions. She worked the mud between her fingers like religious beads. I forgot to write down her name; it was not that important—she was just one of hundreds of walking wounded, so stunned by grief they could not even wail.

The destruction down some streets was nearly total, with houses gutted from the inside. Weirdly, other streets suffered virtually no damage at all, save for shattered windows and often not even that.

We stopped by the house where I had witnessed my first *zikr*; it had been converted into a morgue where the dirge leader was washing the body of a young man just brought in from the forest. We spotted the man I called Santa Claus due to his rosy complexion and long white beard—not Commander Ali, but a town elder. He was rolling the charred remains of three girls in white burial linen. We followed him to the cemetery to find something like a hundred fresh graves. A cleric was chanting the Muslim prayer for the dead over each fresh hole. Survivors shoveled in dirt.

I kept my camera running. It was difficult to stay sane.

We drove down the main street to the southeastern part of town, by the water tower, market, and school. The first stop was Alkhazur's. His welding shop and home were empty.

Dead, or fled?

I instructed Nodar to turn the corner and drive down a short,

muddy street I walked down so many times before. The gate was shut, but the house looked sound. I knocked until my knuckles bled.

"Let's go," said Laurence. "This is not good for you."

And then a shuffle behind the gate, and the creak of a bolt being removed.

The door opened a crack. It was Hussein's mother.

"Toms!" she cried, grabbing me. *"Djivut! He's alive!"*

She had never spoken a word to me before.

I wanted to crow for joy; I wanted to wait for his return from wherever he was hiding

"It is really time to go."

It was Lawrence Sheets, telling me that if I should chose to shirk professional responsibility, that was my business, but that he had to get back to Nazran to file.

Yes, time to file, to broadcast the body-based story of Samashki to the world.

"Let's go, now."

I tried to say something comforting or encouraging to Hussein's mother, but she was already sitting down in a heap and was only capable of weeping.

Who else from my household survived?

"Let's go," said Sheets, and that time I followed him out the courtyard door to the muddy street and back into our transport and back down the high road toward the mosque and then the bridge and then the station. The armored train was there, pulling a dozen flatcars piled high with ammunition and the wheeled vehicles of war.

I tried to explain to Sheets that this was the entire reason for all subsequent events and that we needed to stop and shoot some footage of the fucking train, but Lawrence was *very* insistent. It was time to go before the window snapped shut with us inside the house of death.

As an insurance policy to protect our tapes, we picked up an elderly Chechen woman on our way out of town who obligingly stuffed our cassettes down her blouse.

There was no need.

"Bet you got some good material," said the baby-faced sergeant at Post 13, poking his head in the car, smiling.

"*You're on the air!*" crowed Steve Coppen from ABC Moscow, breaking the good news to me on Sheet's telephone. It was soon ringing off the hook with more calls for me than Uncle Larry.

"*Brilliant,*" cried Gillian Findley, the throaty reporter who cut and voiced my Samashki piece for that night's prime-time *ABC World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*.

"We want fifteen hundred full-color words on that massacre you talked about on the BBC," commanded Marie Colvin at the *London Sunday Times*. "I am going for the front page."

"I don't care how you file. You can dictate the whole thing on sat phone at any cost, but we want thirty inches by tomorrow morning. We *need* that story!" pleaded *Newsweek*'s Steve LeVine. That meant two full pages, a whole spread.

And Sonia Mikich.

"You will get on the *next plane* out of there *now* and get up to Moscow and get over to the ABC offices, and *I do not care* if you have to *steal* your tapes back, you will *convert* them to European system and you will *deliver them* here *yesterday*, and I will pay you a great deal of money *in cash*, so move! *I need those tapes!!*"

Remarkable how ninety seconds worth of prime-time attention can change your life for a day, maybe a week, or maybe a lifetime.

A Japanese channel copied the lot and paid me another thousand bucks, cash. Paula Robatelle of the Canadian CBS needed a couple of minutes to round out her own award-winning French language report. A Turkish channel—*Star* or *Show*?—was next in line.

I paid my bills, bought new clothes, took loyal friends out to dinner at outrageously overpriced restaurants. If not the talk of Moscow town, I was at least a temporary player.

The most satisfying moment in the whirlwind of my new life as Witness to Massacre came at the end of that frenetic week, when the Minister of the Interior and Commander in Chief of Field Operations

in Chechnya, Colonel-General Anatoly Kulikov gave his first "meet the press"–style opportunity at the Raddison-Slaviskaya Hotel International Press Center on April 19. Blithely describing how federal forces had restored "constitutional order" in Samashki in accordance with the wishes of the majority of the town's inhabitants, including the mayor and imam, General Kulikov was happy to provide the press with several letters he had received from the town, begging for intervention before the events of early April, and thanking him for the successful outcome of the operation. Still, the general had to admit that the "bandits" in town had put up a hard fight from exactly thirty-one strongholds, and that he, as a military man at war, had been obliged to order his boys to reduce those strongholds to rubble—even if it meant that his men had to throw grenades into basements to flush out militants hiding among terrified civilians in the most cowardly manner.

"In a war where the enemy hides among civilians, there will be civilian casualties," General Kulikov stated. "In wars like this, civilian casualties outnumber military ones."

The commander also noted that his own forces had taken a "surprisingly large" number of casualties during the course of the tough operation. That, he suggested, was the reason why those first journalists and human rights observers to visit Samashki after the battle found so many syringes littering the streets of the town; so many wounded soldiers required immediate relief. Finally, concluded the general, should anyone doubt his assessment of the liberation of Samashki from the Dudayevist bandits who had taken control of the town from its normal, peaceful inhabitants, they were encouraged to check the record of the ICRC and journalists. The former had found everything perfectly normal, given battle conditions, while the latter had been given complete and free access to the town, with the exception of those whose papers were not in order.

I did not even bother to ask a question in the face of these patent and provable lies.

"Who is the best television producer in Russia?" I demanded of ABC's Steve Coppen.

"Kisilov," was his one-word reply.

He was referring to Yevgenii Kisilov, founder, producer, and presenter of the award-winning (and almost revolutionary) weekly news program called *Itogi*, or "Agenda," on the independent NTV station. In a few short years, the program had became something like the equivalent of *60 Minutes* for Russian television viewers.

"You know him?"

"Of course."

"Then please call him and tell him I will donate my tapes, because I hate lies."

I was over at Voice of America reporter Elizabeth Arnold's apartment when the weekly *Itogi* came on the next Sunday night. In addition to her fiancé, a crime-busting cop named Rafi, the viewing crowd consisted of Elizabeth, myself, and a man who introduced himself as Maksharip. With a jolt, I recognized him as being the English-speaking Chechen historian-cum-guerrilla I had encountered outside Samashki back in February, before I had ever met Hussein. Having put down his gun, he was back in Moscow looking for a new "fixer" job in the Western press, selling access to the people who are thought to have abducted Fred Cuny.

The main people missing from the little press-success party were Lawrence Sheets and Sonia Mikich. The former was already back in Chechnya trying to get an interview with Djohar Dudayev in his bear lair in the mountains, while the latter was completing her future award-winning work on the Soldiers' Mothers' March by following the brave ladies on the most recent leg of their quest.

At nine P.M., we gathered in Elizabeth's den and turned on the tube.

After a brief digest of the week's events, Yevgenii Kisilov announced to his audience of millions that the bulk of the program would be devoted to events in Chechnya, and specifically the village of Samashki.

An advertisement. Maybe two. Then Colonel-General Kulikov's press conference, with all the attendant schmooze. Commentary from Kisilov, concluding with a line something like "we'll be back with a slightly different perspective after the break."

An advertisement. Maybe two. Then Kisilov.

"Thanks for staying with us," he said. "Our insider's report from Samashki comes not from one of our regular reporters, but the *Amerikanski* Journalist *To-mas Gol-tes* . . .

Flip to self-shot Goltz, in Muslim prayer cap, standing in front of the bullet-ridden "Samashki" sign in mid-March.

"It doesn't look like much, but for the residents of this muddy farm town in the Chechen plain, it is a place worth fighting for. Its name is Samashki, which in the Chechen tongue means 'the place of deer.' "

In contrast to the usual visual diet of triumphant Russian soldiers pushing forward against "bandit nests filled with militant Islamists," there followed generic material on the perfectly normal people of the town, and its bombing, and then newer material, of soldiers at Post 13 stopping Red Cross vehicles heading toward refugees trudging down an empty road. Finally, shots of a stricken village filled with corpses in the streets or on the way to the cemetery.

"Reportadja To-masa Gol-tza," intoned Yevgeni Kisilov, ending the broadcast.

I had just become a Russian television personality.

It was now time to replace that 90-second news brief on ABC with a 90-minute documentary along the lines of the *Itogi* piece, exposing the full horror of the Chechen war, and to explore ways how to stop it. I made up a target list of channels and networks I would contact: ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox—the works. One of them was sure to bite.

Not.

On April 19, 1995, someone blew up the Federal Building in Oklahoma City—and the massacre at Samashki was instantly relegated to footnote status in the annals of an obscure and forgotten war.

14

GDEJE FRONT? (WHERE'S THE FRONT?)

The fiftieth year anniversary of Victory in Europe Day loomed, and Moscow was the venue. Bill Clinton, John Major, and Francois Mitterand were all Boris Yeltsin's special guests, scheduled to arrive in the Russian capital to celebrate the Allied victory over fascism. The most delicate diplomatic question was whether any units that served in Chechnya would be included in the march-by parade of arms.

Covering the parade was not, however, why ABC wanted me to stay in Russia. Peter Jennings and a host of other State Department, diplomatic, presidential, and foreign news network bigwigs would be doing that and taking care of celebration meetings, greetings, and other press protocols. *The Network Most Americans Get Their News From* needed a fireman. In television press lingo, that meant they needed someone to station in Chechnya, just in case anything untoward and nasty happened during the big bash. It made no difference that they really had no intention of using anything I might shoot. I got a salary and expenses and a camera, and they got an emergency asset pinned to the ABC assignment board. *Chechnya: Goltz.*

They wanted me and I wanted the war.

It was a match made in heaven.

My assignment, such as it was, was to capture a day in the presumably miserable life of a Great War veteran still resident in Grozny. The piece, filled with as much irony as possible, would include said

veteran attending the brass-band VE-Day celebrations in Grozny, and then flip over to the veteran at home, remembering how the Red Army had conquered Berlin in May of 1945. The obvious point was to compare the state of the German and Chechen capitals, fifty years apart.

The reality, however, was for me to just "be there." And the fact that I was nothing more than a resource statistic was made clear by the home-video camera I was issued. It was American system NTSC—in other words, a camera that was incompatible with the European PAL system needed to make a satellite uplink. What this meant was that I was expected to send tapes to Moscow via courier, meaning the airport in Ingushetia. This was difficult enough when covering Samashki, and more or less required that I be at the airport to beg or bribe someone to courier my material to Moscow by four in the afternoon. Although only some fifty miles farther away from the airport than Samashki as the crow flies, Grozny was in fact much farther away in terms of time, due to checkpoints, ruined roads, and the general, unknowable chaos of war. If I were to record anything of interest in and around the Chechen capital, it had better happen before noon, because anything that happened after could never be delivered on time, and would instantly join the general category of yesterday's papers—i.e.: no longer news.

Still, I took my new fireman assignment seriously—or at least took advantage of the assignment to be serious about the war.

I was there at the newly set up Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe housed in Grozny, where the American diplomat Phillip Remler had been tasked with finding out anything he could about the missing American aid worker, Fred Cuny. The Cuny corpse had developed the unique function of being found anywhere the Chechens were under bombardment. The phenomenon was due to the belief that a Cuny sighting, even as a corpse, would result in Washington putting heavy pressure on Moscow to suspend hostilities in the vicinity while a forensic investigation team was sent in to identify dental records and other telltale signs about the identity of the cadaver.

"I have become an expert in the dentals of the dead," smirked Rem-

ler, relating his most recent visit to a Cuny "corpse site." "But unless Fred grew two gold teeth recently and sprouted a metal thigh implant like the body I saw today, it was not him."

I was there, too, in Shamil Basayev's hometown of Vedeno when the Chechens shot down a Russian fighter-bomber, killing the pilot. The smoldering wreck of the plane proved that Yeltsin was in clear violation of his own unilateral cease-fire that he had announced for VE-Day. I was in Shatoi with the BBC's Andrew Harding after Russian missiles hit the town, deep in the mountains and way out of any area that could have been explained away as incidental "localized" violations of the cease-fire accord. Ours was a gut-wrenching, two-wheeling ride around blind corners carved into cliff sides, with me hanging out the passenger window using my arm as a pole and an old laundry bag as a white flag, just in case some distant attack helicopter chose to distinguish between our car and the trucks shuttling Chechen fighters up and down the gutted mountain road.

"Allah ul Akbar!" they shouted as they roared by, as if trying to draw fire. "God is the Greatest!"

Checking for casualties among the strangely casual population—women selling fruit and Polaroid film in the market, a kid teaching himself how to walk on stilts, men boiling vast vats of beef to celebrate the Muslim Feast Of The Sacrifice—we got to the hospital just in time to record the awful, literal moment of expiration of a local man lying in a pool of blood, as a team of truly courageous Belgian doctors desperately tried to punch the man's heart back to life, only to reach despair right in front of the family.

And then I was in Grozny on VE-Day, as per my assignment, hunting for one camera-friendly ancient veteran from the Great War against fascism, as the forefathers (and mothers) of the conquerors of Grozny turned out in their post-Soviet splendor on parade at the Khankale airport, vests dripping with medals. A brass band blared, and all the ancients were treated to a remembrance shot of vodka at the Khankale canteen, before a bus came to take them home under escort, due to the dangers of the night—and thus whisk away my personal, ancient veteran before I ever learned his name or address.

How was I going to find another talkative old codger at this hour to record a day in his miserable life? It actually did not make much difference, because Victory Day was over and there was no way I could send the material to Moscow, even if it had been the purest gold.

The greater issue, in fact, was how was I going to record another day in *my* miserable life with no place to stay in a shattered city with a shoot-on-sight curfew about to go into effect. An armored personnel carrier came roaring down the road carrying a dozen soldiers on top, rifles at the ready. I flagged it down and climbed aboard for a ride into town. A couple of shots rang out at a crossroads and the patrol threw me off, racing in the general direction of the gunfire and leaving me to my own devices. The city administration was not far away, so I trudged over, negotiating my way through the barbed wire and sandbag guard posts with the aid of my press pass, only to discover that the only people on the premises were a knot of burly, nasty guards celebrating VE-Day in a nearby bunker-cum-sauna the old-fashioned way, namely by getting totally smashed on warm vodka.

I joined them. I had no choice. Their names were Vitali and Sasha and Igor and Misha and several others too drunk to talk or pronounce their names. They were all *kontraktini*, or mercenaries, a mixture of policemen from the provinces who wanted to quadruple their salaries, and criminals let out of jail to serve on the front for freedom and loot. They were not nice men, but jolly or drunk enough to tolerate the presence of an American in their midst in memory of the Allies who had together with them brought Hitler to his knees exactly fifty years before. Rounding out the party was a very quiet officer who wore the FSB (renamed KGB) badge on his shoulder, and a local cossack *Ataman,* or clan leader, along with his daughter (or a "working girl"; it was not clear) for a night on the town with the front-line drunks.

"To us, to you, to victory!" roared Vitali, a cop from the Siberian city of Perm, lifting yet another toast.

"You are the son of a whore and a coward," belch-mumbled a mountain of fat in the far corner, a fellow cop/mercenary, apparently. "Let's go at it again."

The pair had been arm wrestling the day away when not knocking

back shots. Vitali won right and then won left and then won right again, and the mountain of fat collapsed back into his corner.

"You Western journalists have much more access to the other side than we do."

It was the FSB/KGB major, quietly inquiring and assessing.

"Often," I carefully replied.

"Do you think you could set up a meeting?"

"With whom?"

"Dudayev."

"Why?"

"Peace."

Was this a serious spook? And even if he were, why was he assuming that a mere Western hack like me could get him up and into the mountains and the bear-lair of the Chechen president and back out again, without him getting both himself and me executed as spies like Fred Cuny? Or was the conversation nothing but a nonsensical bluff made on the fiftieth anniversary of VE-Day in the surreal setting of bombed and shattered Grozny? I do not know and never will, because there was then another toast and then another and then a third, and as midnight neared in the bunker-cum-sauna, my new pals among the legal mercenaries in the new Russian Army loaded their guns and joined others from other bunkers emerging from their drunken dungeons, and then, with a last *nasdarovia*, began blasting the firearms against vacant buildings, shattered walls, and remnants of trees.

Brrrrrrrt!!!! Bam Bam Bam! Brrrrrt! WamBamBammmmmm!!!

The international press reported an intense firefight in Grozny that night; I can report with assurance that it was merely my new pals having fun with AK-47s and RPGs.

I slept in another bunker that night with a bunch of stinking, farting, snoring, and terrified Russian conscript soldiers. Maybe I was the stinking, farting, snoring, and terrified one. I was up at dawn, sharing my cowboy coffee with another early bird, a sullen *kontraktni* who went by the name of Kiril. He was sitting in the middle of a brick-

and-sandbag bunker, guarding some chunk of the administrative building compound, cleaning his gun in the early morning light, and was grateful for the brew. I asked if I could film and he allowed me to shoot the sort of weapons-cleaning-instruction class that you don't see everyday. When he had wiped away all the oil and made sure everything was just fine, Kiril and another monster grunt named Igor then took me on a tour of Grozny's shattered skyline.

"Come on, *Ami,*" they said with nonblinking eyes. "Its time to show you our town."

We started at the municipal post office and worked our way upward through extreme rubble to the city-center rooftops that served as snipers' dens, ending up at a place the *rebonik*, or "guys" referred simply to as "the beach." And indeed, lying in their skivvies on the tarpaper roof paper were a couple of *Ruski* beach bums, catching a few rays. The pair threw me a couple of shit-eating, we-just-got-caught-with-our-pants-down grins while literally hoisting up their underwear. Kiril and another sniper pal just laughed and laughed and laughed while I got it all on film.

Who were these guys?
What did they do back home?
Where was home?
Where was mine?

With VE-Day done, and Clinton, Major, and Mitterand safely out of Moscow and on their way back home, Boris Yeltsin's unilateral cease-fire that had never really been enforced gave way to a new paroxysm of fire and steel across the murky front.

The war went on and I went with it.

I caught a mean team of Russian Military police tossing an Inguish translator into the deep-deep of the so-called filtration camps and saved his sorry ass by bargaining away a Yankee flak jacket for his life. Then I rode with the same nasty MPs on a tour of the front lines and got to experience the unique dynamic of a road collision between their eight-wheeled armored personnel carrier and a T-82 battle tank.

Whack!!!

I was sitting atop the former when the latter came lurching out of a field and smashed into us, and there was not another vehicle for miles around. Seems the tank driver was drunk on vodka and looking for more, or at least he was later when I caught the same tank prowling after hours in the town of Shali, swiveling its big gun around until the villagers produced the drink, and then crunching into a local house and killing the inhabitants beneath its treads an hour later.

I had lots of stuff on tape that never made the network news.

I was there for the siege, negotiated surrender, and then the double-cross aftermath of a lopsided battle for a cement factory that served as a sort of Soviet-style Alamo for the Chechen defenders outside a Soviet-style dump town called Chiri Yurt. The *chemzavod*, or cement factory, that had once supplied most of the cement and related construction materials for Soviet-style building projects from Armenia to the Crimea appeared to be almost a small city when seen from the distance. The smokestacks, burners, storage, loading, and administration buildings covered acres. Below the ground, the complex was said to be honeycombed with tunnels; some said that it doubled as a nuclear war bunker. Who knew; who knows. The main point was that the entire complex had become a death trap for the Chechen fighters dug in there, and subjected to such an intense fire from artillery, attack helicopters, and jet bombers that the thick, black column of smoke billowing from its wounds darkened the sky for miles.

Watching the brick-by-brick destruction of the complex had become a form of entertainment for the people of Chiri Yurt, many of whom had once been employed in the *chemzavod*. Gathering in the town square—which gave an unimpeded view of the factory across a potato field—residents would squat on their haunches like they were at a crude outdoor movie without proper benches, waiting for a real-life Arnold Schwarzennegger flick to start. The first signal that the daily show was about to commence was the monotonous droning of a high-flying helicopter, spotting targets through the smoky haze for distant gunners. These were the "trailers," as it were: the short outtakes that preview coming attractions. Next would come the credits—the ran-

dom whacking from a line of mobile howitzers positioned some two or three miles to the north.

The first indication that the show had actually started would be small puffs of smoke rising from the factory grounds. The report of exploding shells would reach the audience after a delay of several seconds. Sometimes the audience would be caught by surprise by the shock-blast of a big hit, with a thick curtain of smoke later rising from the center of the factory, because the shells landing behind it exploded offstage and the concussions coming seemingly from nowhere.

"Look—here comes an SU-27," said Ibrahim Kazbekov, a functionary in the local town administration. He was pointing at a spec in the sky that grew larger by the second. It was a jet bomber, flying at around five hundred meters above the ground. Silently, it zipped over the administration building and then was gone. The *woosh* and *roar* of its engines followed after about three seconds. Then there was a plume of smoke moving upward from the area around the main smokestack in the *chemzavod,* which turned crimson and then blew upward into a tremendous fireball that rose higher than the jet had been flying. Silence, then *Boom.* The retort of the explosion, delayed by several seconds, knocked down a ten-year-old kid standing next to me.

"Vacuum bomb," said Ibrahim clinically, helping the kid back to his feet. "Looks like they managed to hit an underground diesel fuel tank."

For once I did not feel guilty about being a voyeur of death and destruction, because all the locals were doing the same.

I was there, too, in the nearby neutral town of Novi Atagi for cease-fire negotiations between Chechen commander General Aslan Maskhadov and General Genadi Trochev, the supreme commander of Russian forces in the sector. The meeting was held at the house of Rizvan Laylorsanov, the director of the *chemzavod* at Chiri Yurt during its salad days as the largest cement factory in the Soviet Caucasus. It must have been a position with perks, because Rizvan's residence did not reflect any sort of penury. Set on a prime acre of real estate at the edge of town, his was a mansion made of red brick and pine. The main quarters, liberally strewn with televisions and deep freezers, must have been three hundred square meters, not including the patio

area. The *avlu*, or traditional reception area for visitors on holidays, seated at least fifty. The toilet was an outhouse tucked away in the garden.

Now it was the venue for Generals Maskhadov and Trochev to work out the modalities of surrendering the *chemzavod,* and negotiate an exchange of corpses. While fascinating in itself, this was less interesting for me than meeting General Maskhadov and making my own measure of the man. By all accounts, Maskhadov had mounted an extraordinary defensive campaign with the limited means at hand. In Grozny, his adroit use of three-man hit-and-run teams to attack, pin down, and then destroy Russian armor had been so effective that Moscow began making up excuses for its humiliation. My favorite was that the Chechen mafia had hired an army of Amazon mercenaries from Latvia to do its dirty work for it. Reality was a lot more prosaic: Maskhadov had his men travel through the city's sewer system to pop up behind the lines for lightning strikes, before disappearing down the drains once again.

I had no chance to ask Maskhadov about any of this. After quickly paying his respects to a line of Chechen elders sitting in a row along the *avlu* wall, he disappeared into Rizvan's guesthouse, leaving his boots on the steps, lest he sully the interior of the house with the filth of the street. Nor was I given the opportunity to have a word with General Trochev. As soon as he entered the *avlu* with his bodyguards, he saluted the elders, untied his boots, and walked up the steps to the guesthouse in his stocking feet. Aside from the two aides-de-camp, the only people allowed into the room were the women of the house, as they scurried from the kitchen to the guest house with steaming pots of *pilav*, soup, spring lamb, and fried potatoes, fresh bread and homemade butter, cottage cheese, local honey, and gallons of tea.

Maskhadov's and Trochev's bodyguards waited in the *avlu*, chatting like old pals about school, favorite football teams, and all the other sort of common memories youth raised in the former Soviet Union-Russian Federation Republic might reasonably share. Often, it seemed that the only thing that really distinguished the two groups were the

beards worn by the Chechens and the high-top basketball shoes favored by the Russian grunts. And I had it all on tape.

Finally, after two hours, Generals Maskhadov and Trochev emerged from their room and all fraternization came to an abrupt end. The bodyguards leapt to their feet and reverted to their discrete groups. The Russians followed Trochev out the door, while the Chechen guard escorted their leader over to a knot of twenty elders who had gathered to learn about the fates of their respective towns. All wore *astrakhan* hats, despite the fact that it was over eighty degrees Fahrenheit.

"Agreement has been reached to clear the cement factory of fighters by giving them free passage out and into the woods," Maskhadov told the elders. "A delegation of townspeople will be allowed in to help the wounded and to collect bodies for burial. The modalities will be dealt with by the local Russian military authorities and the civil administration of Chiri Yurt."

Then he turned on his heel, marched with his guard to his transport, and was gone, having shared nothing about the larger peace he was trying to work out with Trochev.

Outside Rizvan's, I found a baby-faced Russian named Colonel Sergei huddled with Maskhadov's chief of staff, a captain named Isa, and the local representative of Chiri Yurt, Ibrahim Kazbekov, scratching in the dirt to delineate lines.

"I guarantee your security," Colonel Sergei was stressing. "At five o'clock, you can come and collect the bodies at this point."

Captain Isa was not impressed.

"How can you talk of security guarantees when your tanks are still firing?"

"I guarantee your security," Colonel Sergei repeated. "You have my guarantee."

A crowd of young men had gathered at the end of the street and were starting to shout ugly epithets at the Russians. Ibrahim and Rizvan stepped in to calm them down.

"They are guests in my house!" roared Rizvan. "They have my personal guarantee!"

At five o'clock, we were back at Chiri Yurt and on our way to the *chemzavod.* Although it was still belching smoke, it was quiet now. There was Russian armor in the surrounding fields, but the tank crews had stripped to their waists and were washing in the irrigation canals. The front line had shifted again, and Chiri Yurt and the *chemzavod* were now behind it. I did not even put on my flak jacket as we drove down the shell-splattered road and tried to forget about mines.

The factory grounds were a sorry sight. Huge gaping holes yawned from the asphalt, the gravel, and the grass. All trees within one hundred yards of any building had been reduced to stumps. Used, puke-green ammunition boxes were strewn everywhere.

In the parking lot near the administrative building—or what I assumed to be such—twisted lumps of metal represented what had once been cars. A military truck—Chechen? Russian?—blocked access to what I decided was the company canteen. Sightless eyes had been shot through its windshield exactly where driver and passenger would have been sitting; its front wheels had been amputated by a mine.

Then there were the buildings of the *chemzavod.* Seemingly every square foot of masonry had been shot at and hit. Smoke still billowed from the windows of those buildings that had not collapsed. It did not require a degree in structural engineering to understand that Rizvan's beloved *chemzavod* would have to be rebuilt from scratch in order to ever produce one bag of mortar again. I pointed my camera at the smoldering ruins and scarcely had the frame in focus before I had a rifle barrel pointed at my gut.

"Hey, you—*out!!*" my friend, or acquaintance, the baby-faced Colonel Sergei screamed at me. "Get the fuck out of here, *now!*"

I thought it prudent to take his advice, and moseyed down the road.

After a brittle hundred yards or so, I ran into frustrated rescue workers.

"What's up?" I asked an elderly man with a long white beard and orange skull cap.

"A double cross," he grunted.

Then he looked at his watch and glanced at the sky, found an internal compass, and removed himself to the edge of the road to set

about performing his ablutions. Others joined him, leaving me alone on the road as they began performing afternoon prayers.

Your town is being destroyed and your world is bombed and all you can do is praise God? *Who were these people?*

As the line of faithful bowed their heads toward Mecca, the Russians guns now stationed inside the twisted ruins of what had once been the primary source of building material in the Caucasus began dumping high trajectory shells on the wooded hills five hundred yards away.

KirVOOM! came the initial report from the factory.

A four-second pause, followed by a puff of white smoke in the forest.

The Russians were interdicting the escape routes that they had guaranteed to leave open, and not just with regular munitions. Beautiful, thick white smoke, cumulus clouds in miniature, now lingered over the trees like a blanket.

Phosphorus. While not expressly forbidden by the Geneva Conventions, the wicked weapons should be banned: They suck up all oxygen and suffocate anything in their vicinity; collateral effects include third-degree burns when the ash falls on naked skin. Fun.

The praying men prayed, and the shells continued to fall. Then, Ibrahim and the other rubble and relief workers emerged from the factory, walking in our direction with empty stretchers and ashen faces.

"There are no bodies in there," said Ibrahim.

No bodies?

"Either the fighters have removed all the dead with them, or something else has happened," said Ibrahim, trying to take control of the situation.

"Like what!?" some elderly man demanded.

"We cannot say for sure, but we think the Russian forces have collected the bodies themselves to use as bargaining chips for POW exchanges," he said evenly. "We will look into the matter further tomorrow."

It took awhile to sink in.

Colonel Sergei had kept the bodies for use as exchange currency in the future.

Who was that guy?

Distant shepherds twirling their staffs over a timeless mountain landscape. Kids playing King of the Haystack. A series of ancient stone towers, guarding access to the upper valleys of the Argun River, which turned from a sluggish stream into a white-water roar. Perhaps I thought of Montana, romantically and impossibly, if so. Because it was not the upper Yellowstone, Smith, or Gallatin, where a solitary white-water kayaker, or brace of trout fishermen in a drift boat might be expected around the next thundering gorge. This was the spinal column of Chechnya at war, the river route and highway leading into the mountains, that was (or should have been) the primary target for every piece of artillery and all the air power the Russians had to blast the rebels off the map, forever. They were trying, judging by the snarled, if no longer smoldering hunks of shattered metal pitched over the sides of the road, and sometimes still on it.

On and on through Chechnya at war.

Grozny, Vedeno, Shatoi, Gudermes, Shatoi (again) and back for another night in shattered Shali or neutral Novi Atagi as the guest of Rizvan Laylorsanov, or that basketball player who strummed the guitar and sang songs about peace while projectiles screamed overhead, and then, again, Stari Atagi for a funeral for eight.

"How were they killed?" I asked.

"Aviation last night," came the response.

The graves were dug and only waited for the white shrouded corpses to arrive in reusable wooden litters. The mourners parted to let the bearers through; one by one, the bodies were lifted from their litters and placed in the graves. The bodies were positioned to face Mecca, and then wooden beams were placed across the shrouded corpses. The imam called out the *Fatiha*, while the mourners lifted the palms of their hands toward heaven and murmured the sacred words: *Bismillah AR-Rahman ar Rahim.*

In the name of the God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,
All Praise to The God, Lord of All The Worlds,
The Compassionate, The Merciful.

The burial rites were repeated twice, three times, four. After the fifth body had been gently placed in its final resting place, the prayers were not so much interrupted as counterpointed by the *woop-woop-woop* of helicopter blades churning through the sky. And then came another sound from behind a row of older gravestones, perhaps some fifty meters away: a baritone humming sound, above which rose the most melancholy, almost-lachrymose, spine-stinging tenor voice I have ever heard, ringing through the graveyard air.

"AllllAAAH Vidimo Xarjist O!"

It was a dirge circle, consisting of perhaps a dozen men, eyes closed, with tears streaming down their faces, singing the deceased into eternity.

"Vedeno Khankale Surmut Way, Bizteriq Khambundo Wansee yeq!"

Again, the sound of helicopters approaching; again, not a hint of movement from the men in the circle. But slowly, a change of pace, as if to give audio-witness to a complete lack of fear. First the fingertips began tapping on the upper leg, softly, gently, as the tenor continued his chant over the solid bass and baritone of the voices around him. Then full finger-tapping that actually resulted in a muffled beat. Then the full extended hand, fingers and palm, striking out a basic rhythmic pattern, as the chorus of dirge chanters moved from merely humming to mouthing real words to the beat.

La illah il Allah, La illah il Allah!

Distant explosions and with a sudden *woosh*, a jet overhead. But from the group of men squatting in the cemetery, not a flicker of movement, not a single eye peeped open to make a visual assessment of the situation, not a hint from anyone that maybe it just might have been better to move to some sort of shelter.

Who were these people?

The chant continued for another five or ten minutes; maybe an hour.

I had long since turned the camera off, and was merely sitting as close to the circle as I thought decent for an outsider, desperately wanting to be inside it with them to get just a little closer to that ineffable thing that inspired and sustained them, to share in their spirit. Then the dirge slowed, the hands turned into tapping fingers, and then they stopped tapping altogether, and then it was over, because it was time for prayers. One by one, the men rose, removed their shoes, formed lines, and then lifted their palms toward heaven, their mosque the cemetery, their prayer mats the grass.

I spotted him near the cemetery, a stooped old man scurrying back from Grozny's fresh produce market, a bag of vegetables in his hand and a hero's decoration dangling from his tattered suit coat. His name was Viktor, and I followed him home to his third-story flat on *WhateverSkaya* street, an apartment in one of those buildings found in virtually every Soviet city and usually called *Dom Geroi*, or Heroes' Houses. The stairwell leading to Viktor's abode was also standard for a Soviet structure dating to the 1940s or '50s: flagstone steps, worn in the middle, working their way up through a maze of tangled electrical wires, graffiti, and general neglect for the common space shared by all tenants, including decorated veterans of WWII.

"*Prekhadite!*" said Viktor, asking me to enter.

The apartment was—*what?*

Normalna, in the Soviet sense: a couple of dumpy easy chairs and a sofa pushed against the edges of the living room, a cluster of still-life pictures pinned on the flower-pattern wallpaper walls. A piano, out of tune, a stuffed chair or two, and dominating everything else a very large, glass-encased bookshelf filled with encyclopedias and other untouched classics (Tolstoy and Lermontov, as well as Soviet-approved translations of Hemingway, Henry James, and Jack London, all favorite "socialist" authors) churned out by Soviet-era publishing. The kitchen had a tiny fridge and the toilet and bathroom were two different rooms, with no sink in the former, and a rotational spigot in the latter

that served, by turns, both for washing hands and taking a shower. All standard Soviet issue.

What was different about the apartment were the bullet-blasted holes in the ceiling and walls. Viktor pulled off his suit coat and rolled up his shirt to show me the shrapnel cuts he had received when the first RPG smacked into the wall of his study where he had been sitting, waiting out the madness on the streets of his hometown.

"I am a Russian, a veteran of the Great War, and a conqueror of Berlin," he intoned. "I have seen filth and horror—but I never expected my army to do this to *me!*"

The sound bites comparing Berlin to Grozny were good material and exactly what I wanted. But then Viktor threw me a curveball. Without reference to the fact that I was shooting, he got up and walked to his library and extracted a large folder and plopped it down on the living room table. It was his Book of War, consisting of diary entries and press clips and assorted photographs of the men in his unit, men drawn from across the depth and breadth of the Soviet space, and of every ethnic background one could think of.

"Ah, this is Kasimov, my Azeri friend. We forced the fascists out of bunker twenty-three at Selow with our mortar, and this is Bedrossian, the Armenian who saved my life in the eastern suburbs of the fascist capital when he warned me the woman on the bicycle was carrying a grenade and shot her dead before she could reach my trench."

The veteran turned page after page, reading every line, finger-scrolling over the text.

"Then on May 2, following our short celebration of International Workers' Day, we pushed on to Potsdam and the enemy entrenchments there. It was a hard fight."

Viktor was giving me the closing moments of World War II and the street fighting that ended with the capture of Berlin, but I was not really interested. I wanted his account of the Russian conquest of Grozny, and although he was well placed to do so, his focus remained on the war he had fought exactly fifty years before.

"Then, on May 4, Colonel Tikhamirov announced the 104th would

have the honor to advance on the enemy down the Prinzlauer Allee, and into the heart of the fascist beast."

Viktor was reading, mesmerized by the propaganda prose he was voicing, maybe even chanting, so soaked in memories he was not even aware when I turned off my camera.

"On May 6, following the dispute between captains Bugadov and Trishkin, the order was given to advance, despite the desperate fire of the enemy from the city center; it was then that Corporal Liftinski, who had been with me since Stalingrad and was a fine socialist soldier, sustained a curious wound in his abdomen that neither myself nor the medics were able to abort, and Corporal Liftinski died in my arms at three-thirty-seven that afternoon. After burying him in a garden—he always spoke passionately of his garden in Irbit, where he farmed as part of the First of May Tractor Commune in that district—we continued to advance on the enemy, cogently aware of snipers . . ."

I snuck out of Victor's home, leaving the old man alone with his memories, catching the evening plane back to Moscow with little hope that *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings* would have any room for Viktor and Chechnya and me.

They did not.

"The story has moved on," said ABC.

I was not surprised or even disappointed. They had been friendly enough to give me a camera and pay me decent money to go down and hang as the emergency ABC video news asset in Chechnya, and that was good enough. But I also had a pretty good idea of another channel that might be interested in my new war archives.

"Let us take a look at what you shot," asked Yevgenii Kisilov over at NTV's *Itogi*. Five minutes later he went into conference with his producers and then came back to me.

"Write me a script. Four or five minutes. We are using this tonight."

"Script?" I asked. "On what?"

"The front."

"There is no front."

"Then call it just that. *Gdeje Front?*—'Where's the Front?' "

And so I did. About fifteen minutes or a half hour later I was in

the sound studio voicing a short piece that meditated on the inanity, weirdness, and wickedness of war in the Caucasus, with a series of video images arbitrarily culled from the material I had shot for ABC. It began with Belgian doctors in Shatoi desperately trying to pump the heart of a blood-stained victim back to life following a rocket attack that had officially never happened, a two-meter-tall basketball player in better times strumming a guitar and singing a lament about Chechnya in Russian, a triumphant young guerilla standing on the shattered tail of the crashed fighter-bomber at Vedeno, the negotiations between Aslan Maskhadov and General Trochev at Novi Atagi, and the subsequent double cross at the Chiri Yurt cement factory. Then there was the funeral for eight and the dirge circle at Stari Atagi, the collision between the Captain Artur Kinjaliyan's APC and the rogue T-82 battle tank driven by drunks, the wild night in Grozny celebrating VE Day in Europe by firing AK-47 tracers and RPG grenades against the walls of gutted buildings next to Salman Khadjiev's administration office, morning coffee with Kiril and his pals cleaning their guns for another day of shooting after a brief break to sun their buns at The Beach atop the shattered central post office, and, finally, the VE-Day parade in Grozny and the slow walk home with a stooped old man named Viktor, hero of the Great War, reading from his personal scrapbook that might be regarded as his Book of the Dead.

In the television trade, throwing images together like this is called "wallpapering," and is frowned on by Western television (and particularly American-network) stylists.

"It was beautiful," said Steve Coppen, the ABC bureau boss the next day, as I stopped by to square the circle and say good-bye. "I only wish I could pitch something like that to the desk—but they would never go for it. There is no American involved."

Where's The Front?

It was no longer Samashki.

I had not even bothered to stop by there.

PART FOUR

15 THE CONSOLATION PRIZE IS LIFE

For a guy who does not own a television set, it was a little overwhelming.

Everyone who was anyone in international TV was there, coiffed and perfumed and dressed in tuxedo or gown. John Simpson, Michael Ignatieff, Tira Shubart, Sue Inglish of Channel Four, Peter Jouvenal, Mark Foley and the entire ABC London office, Ron McCullough of Insight News, and blocks of producers, reporters, editors, and camerapeople from CNN, ITN, WTN, and APTV, to name just a few of the alphabet soup of acronyms standing for the *International This* and *World That* agencies and production houses specializing in foreign television news.

The presenter was Nik Gowing, the anchor of the BBC's Evening News Division, but the focus of the evening was Rory's widow, Juliette, an iron lady with an aristocrat's accent and a black patch over one eye.

Rory, of course, was the late, great Rory Peck.

A swashbuckling cameraman extraordinaire who had worked every hellhole from Afghanistan to Abkhazia, Rory had given the concept of "freelance" such new and profound meaning in the way of devotion to duty that he had become an icon long before his death. On that awful day of October 3, 1993, in Moscow, when Boris Yeltsin "reestablished" democratic order in the "New Russia" by turning tanks first on the White House, or Russian parliament. Not satisfied with that, he then turned his attention to the Ostankino Television tower, allegedly because discontents were about to seize control of Russian broadcasting and announce a coup, or maybe a revolution against Yeltsin's

revulsions. Rory was there with his camera as soldiers and snipers began shooting into the crowd, and he caught a sniper's bullet through the brain as he filmed footage for Sonia Mikich and her ARD bureau. We had been together in Tbilisi only two or three days before, laughing and drinking after my escape from Sukhumi. For Rory, the consolation prize for not living longer took the form of an annual award in his name, presented to the freelance cameraman who had shown most gumption in any given year.

The first year, the Rory Peck Prize was awarded posthumously to Farhad Karimov, a cameraman from Azerbaijan. He had worked with Lawrence Sheets in diverse Caucasus conflict zones, such as the siege and fall of Sukhumi in 1993, but most notably during the siege and fall of Grozny in the winter of 1994–1995, when he had established a reputation for himself as someone willing to take the most insane risks imaginable just to capture a particular shot. I had last seen Farhad at the Reuters office at the Raddison-Slavanskaya hotel in Moscow in March of that year, when he was desperately trying to check out reports that another Reuters cameraman, Adil Bunyadov, had just been killed in Baku during the course of a confusing counter-coup melee. I noted that Farhad's attitude toward frontline camerawork had begun to change.

"All we are doing is risking our lives and those of the people around us for the sake of entertainment," he had said at the time. He then said he was so sick of war reporting that he had hung up his camera and "returned to the mosque," meaning he had quit smoking and drinking and had turned to prayer, urging me to do the same.

That is what Farhad had said then. But within a week or two he had changed his mind. Either the compulsion to cover war or the compulsion to cover debt had led him to cast his pacific vows aside and take on a new combat camera job with the Associated Press. Camera in hand, he had come up the same Azerbaijan-Dagestan-Chechnya pipeline that I had traveled scant months before, when he was murdered in the mountains before he could record a moment of his journey.

For his money? His camera? His smile?

Farhad, like Rory, was now lionized as the epitome of selfless news-serving, a legend deserving posthumous awards. Accolades, instead of a longer life.

Ours was the second year of the Rory Peck prize, and a wide field of entries had been culled down to four finalists, whose work, in the words of the chairman of judges, met the Rory Peck criteria of being as human, stylish, and eccentric as the man the prize was named after. We were also, most notably, all still alive.

This could not be said for Rory, Farhad, and a number of other freelancers who appeared within the context of the warmup film shown to kick off the gala affair. The extreme case was an overly aggressive Bosnian who had managed to film his own death, which we all got to see in extended form on the screen in front of us.

The list of dead and missing was extensive, but there was equal focus on the parallel issue of the surviving wives and children of killed cameramen, who, through the lack of combat or danger insurance, had been flung into debt and destitution. The frustration and plight of freelancers collecting *bang-bang* material that was simply too awful and brutal to be shown in anything other than snuff movies was another theme. Why bother to collect such material at all?

Then Nik Gowing, a face more known and respected in the U.K. and the larger BBC world than Peter Jennings, Tom Brokaw, and Dan Rather combined, appeared behind the lectern to formally introduce each of the four finalists for the 1996 Rory Peck Award, and show a short, representative clip of the work that had brought each candidate to the hall.

The first was a three- or four-minute segment of a feature piece by Canadian producer and camerawoman Jane Kokan that had appeared on Channel Four's *Dispatches* program. It was entitled *"Sanski Most,"* or "The Bridge at Sanski," and detailed with humor and brutality the activities of a Bosnian battalion in the final paroxysm of violence of the Bosnia–Serbia war. The next was a news story from Hedley Trigge, a BBC stringer in the Middle East who had been traveling with a UN relief convoy in Lebanon when it was bombed by precision-placed Israeli artillery, an attack designed not so much to kill or maim the

Blue Berets as scare the shit out of them. The third candidate was a dark piece on beleaguered journalists in Algeria by Shane Teehan, but it could have been on Colombian drug wars, or Sri Lanka strife for all I cared, because my piece was next, and quite frankly I was not watching anything else by anybody any longer.

"Thomas Goltz, one of the finalists tonight, spent six months among the Chechens with no guarantee that he would make a farthing until his reportage was purchased by ABC," Gowing solemnly intoned.

This was not exactly correct, but close enough to tickle. I had spent perhaps six weeks in Samashki, and ABC had only *really* been interested in the sixty seconds of massacre footage broadcast more than a year and a half before, and not in the material that had gone into the ten-minute piece that had brought me to the Peck Awards, but no matter.

The lights dimmed, and on the huge screen in that packed auditorium came images that had me traveling back in time.

Hussein, spinning that waterwheel at the pump station he had previously wanted to buy, when oblivious to the fact that said station had been made out of the tombstones of his ancestors; *Hussein,* single-loading shells in that front-line gun pit against amazingly overwhelming odds; *Hussein,* the defender of Samashki against the Russian Bear; the first storming of the town, the mothers and monks march, and then corpses being lowered into graves as Samashki put its dead to rest. *"When shall the bloodshed cease in the mountains?"* came my recorded voice, quoting a Chechen proverb. *"When sugarcane grows in the snow."*

And then the clip was over and Nik Gowing was calling us to mount the stage.

"Good luck," we said to each other, smiling and lying to each other the way all finalists have done for all time and will continue to do.

We all wanted ourselves to win and hoped the rest were losers.

It had been a long march to the Rory Peck Awards.

Following an assignment from the *New York Times* to cover the

great earthquake on the far eastern Russian island of Sakhalin, I had returned to Montana via Istanbul to lick my wounds of war. A swing band was playing at the Murray Bar, a swimmer was lost in the Yellowstone flood, and Walter and Maggie Kirn had gotten married. I nearly burned down the barn because my hillbilly welfare tenants wouldn't leave and let me back in my house, and Senate leader Newt Gingrich had launched his Contract With America. I did not quite understand all the excitement and buzz about e-mail and the Internet because I did not yet know what e-mail and the Internet were. I guess I had been out of the technological loop for a spell, with war raging all around me.

Or without me.

In June 1995, the Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev and a crowd of suicide commandoes had bribed their way across Russian lines and penetrated some two hundred kilometers outside Chechnya's border to take over a hospital in the Russian town of Budyanovsk, and were using over one hundred patients as human shields.

This was hot! This was news!

But I could not get an assignment to send me back over to *my* war. The reason for my unemployed state, I was sure, was directly connected to a fax I had received upon my return from Moscow to Montana.

The line quality was bad, but it was still very identifiably a mug shot of me wearing a beard and staring at a camera for a passport photo. Someone had inked in the word *"(Un) Wanted!"* in bold letters over the portrait, in the spirit of the words *Dead or Alive* that used to adorn hanging trees throughout the Old West. The more modern symbol of undesirability—a large "X" similar to *No Smoking, No Radios, and No Skateboards*—crossed out my face. Beneath this image, also written in bold type, were the words *"VNI Hall of Heroes,"* but with a "Z" written over the "H" of the last word, converting the sentence to *"VNI Hall of Zeroes."*

Video News International, the people who had left me in the lurch in Chechnya, had been having some fun at my expense. But what was written at the bottom of the one-page poster was not very humorous at all. It read:

Tomas Stalinsky Goltzkoi: Leader of Russian forces in the assault on Chechnya, he attempted the ultimate spin-doctor maneuver by trying to pass off badly shot home video of same as a journalist's account of stubborn Chechen resistance to superior fire power.

The poster.

I had sent dozens of copies of my rough-cut Samashki film to dozens of production houses, but with no result. Thanks, but no thanks, was the nicest reply I received.

True, the war in Chechnya had moved so far off the American news radar that it had literally disappeared from view—but I was increasingly convinced that the reason I could not get an assignment was because my reputation had been ruined.

The poster.

Not only was I a lousy cameraman and journalist, but also a Russian disinformation specialist. Had the poster traveled to those very same New York newsrooms that were now turning down my Samashki film left and right? What about Europe? Turkey? Russia? Chechnya?

No, it did not look like a joke to me.

My erstwhile employers were not only ruining my career—they had just put a potential death warrant on my head.

The poster.

In retrospect, I guess my behavior might be said to be linked to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder caused by the rusty razor blade of a distant war remembered, and the fact that I was forced to watch it as a distant voyeur. I spit and fought and drank and shrieked and relived Samashki and Chechnya on a daily basis, alienating friends and family, and hating the fireworks on the Fourth of July. There was Crow Fair and Annual All-Indian Rodeo within sight of the Little Big Horn Battlefield, where I joined the Fancy Dancers from the Lakota reservation, performing a *zikr* in the open sessions while trying to make profound connections between the white man's conquest of the American West and the Russian conquest of the Caucasus. If this sounds strange—and to this day I do not think the comparison so

much unreasonable as just obscure—I was certainly drifting off in still more distant directions and walking the thin line that separates delusion from insight.

Months passed. September, October, and then the holiday season and December, and I had been without a stitch of income for more than six months, save for an article written for *Soldier of Fortune* and a couple of lectures at scattered venues, where the main income came from charging the organizers the equivalent value of the Sky Miles cash-in tickets that I burned. Friends and family were fronting me small loans, and my diet consisted almost exclusively of deer I had shot during hunting season.

The poster.

The only access to information on Chechnya was a newly created Web site on the newly created Internet. The Web site was run by a Dane named Norbert for a dozen or so obsessed members of a Chechnya-specific discussion group to which I became instantly addicted, logging on for all-night, on-line screed sessions with the other ether personalities who also seemed to have nothing better to do than sit up all night and rant-punch the keyboard. The most frequent contributor, and thus combatant, was an Armenian academic named Artur, who kept changing his name when suspended from the list for violating Netiquette, mainly in the way of hurling personal abuse and invective at a car mechanic who lived somewhere in Massachusetts and who went by the name of Mark, but had been revealed as really being a North Caucasian Muslim named Murat. Other regulars included a Canadian Quaker named Ross, who urged peace for both the real and the electronic Chechnya, and a Washington-based lawyer named Boyd, whose convoluted legal analysis and determination to take Boris Yeltsin to the newly established War Crimes tribunals at the Hague only partially obfuscated the fact that he was either insane or an anarchist or both.

I had no one else to speak to; I knew no one else who cared. It was, altogether, a bleak Montana winter.

Then in February, or maybe March 1996, the telephone rang.

The person on the other end of the line identified himself being one

Danny Schechter, and in a thick New York accent he explained that he was the director of a New York City production house called Global Vision. Specifically, he said he was the producer of a program called *Right and Wrongs*, and that he had finally gotten around to viewing that VHS tape I had sent months before. While the quality of the copy was pretty bad, he was interested if I had the originals, because *R&W* was thinking of doing a special episode on Chechnya, and that while they did not pay much because they were a not-for-profit organization dedicated to truth and verity, there might be some compensation involved if the original material were up to snuff.

Rights and Wrongs. I had never heard of the show before.

The Global Vision office was located in a building fenced in by kebab stands and basement porno joints on Broadway and the low fifties, and was in a constant state of chaos of interns running in and out of cramped studios working on seventeen shows at once. Framed letters of thanks and praise, including one from Nelson Mandela, had pride of place in the visitor's waiting area. They described Global Vision in terms such as "radical" and "extraordinary." One framed newspaper clip described Danny Schechter—usually referred to as the "News Dissector," it seemed—as being a visionary child of the 1960s antiwar movement who had won a coveted Nieman Fellowship at Harvard in the 1970s, translated that into a full producer's job at ABC in the 1980s, only to toss it all away in disgust at the dumbing-down practices of the mainstream American media, which was only interested in product for profit.

I heard The Dissector ranting on the phone about something to someone some fifteen minutes before he kicked his office door open and commanded his secretary to allow me to enter the inner sanctum. He greeted my arrival with a torrent of abuse to whomever he was talking to on the other line, while suggesting with hand gestures that I redistribute the mounds of yesterday's papers scattered on his visitor's chair and have a seat.

"No, no, no!" he shouted, maligning his invisible audio victim. "I will *not* accept that bastard's apology! Remind him that until he comes *crawling on his knees to beg forgiveness for his awful journalistic sins,*

we will continue to *ream his ass* and *refer to him as the fascist that he is!!"*

Clunk went the telephone, and the News Dissector finally turned to me.

"Hi, I'm Danny—and you're Glotz, right?"

"Goltz, actually."

"Now, look—your material is great, but what you sent me was shit," he said. "But we need your material as the centerpiece of a special feature we want to do on Chechnya."

I was flabbergasted at how quickly my life had changed.

"So let's go downtown," said the Dissector. "There is a film about rape as a weapon of war featuring a couple of women from Bosnia I am supposed to introduce, and after that we'll catch a drink."

We hit the film on Twelfth Street and then followed up with a reception at NYU, before dipping down to Tribeca to talk business. I forget the name of the bar, but it featured some two hundred different types of vodka, most at five bucks a shot.

"You know why I like you?" asked the News Dissector rhetorically.

"No," I honestly replied.

"It is because you hate Michael Rosenblum."

Rosenblum was the creator and CEO of Video News International, now New York Times TV, and presumed author of the malignant poster depicting me as a KGB plant.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because Rosenblum hijacked my idea and called it his own. It was *me* who developed the idea of distributing home video cameras to one-man-band journalists. But Rosenblum grabbed the idea and turned it into a for-profit business. Sold the idea to the *New York Times* for twenty million bucks! I was giving cameras away left and right in South Africa *for free* long before Michael Rosenblum was born! That's an exaggeration. But this is not: Do you know what he did with the first chunk of heavy money he received when the *Times* bought him out?"

"He bought himself a midlife-crisis red Porsche when I was sleeping in a Moscow gutter," I snarled.

"Don't get crazy," cautioned the Dissector. "Just remember what the greatest form of revenge is."

"Success."

Welcome to *Rights and Wrongs,* human rights TV.

If the average American television viewer never saw the half-hour Global Vision special on Chechnya in the scattered, three-week broadcast period of late April to early May 1996 on their local PBS channel, they are to be forgiven. Although half an hour long and narrated by Charlayne Hunter-Gault, the program was pretty hard to spot. It showed on channel 13 in New York City at 2:30 A.M. on a Sunday and on channel 9 in Chicago at 7:30 A.M. Saturday, and was rebroadcast at 1 A.M. on Wednesday. The Washington, D.C., area pulled it in at some other ungodly hour, and California—excluding L.A. and San Francisco, as I recall—ran the show at midnight on Tuesday or dawn on Friday. Yes, one thing can be said with assurance: Nowhere in the entire United States of America was *Rights and Wrongs/Chechnya* run on anything approximating prime-time TV. It was a marginal program, full stop. Myself, I happened to be staying at the house of antitelevision friends in Seattle at the time, and had to resort to ducking out to a local bar to catch the broadcast at noon on Saturday, only to find myself speaking in *Spanish.*

But it made little difference what the language was or how many hours off prime time the program was shown. *Rights and Wrongs/ Chechnya* was a broadcast of my material on Hussein and Samashki in calendar year 1996, and its producer, Danny Schechter, thought he might send it in as a candidate for the second year of the Rory Peck Awards, which I had never heard of, although Rory was my friend.

I am not sure who was more surprised when I was announced as being a finalist, myself on my way to London, or Michael Rosenblum, then on his way out the door from New York Times TV—possibly, I would like to think, because of me.

Thanks again, Danny.

Under the klieg lights, we four finalists for the Rory Peck Award waited for the CEO of Sony Europe to gain the podium and announce the jury decision. I felt more exposed than I did getting shot at in the streets of Samashki. I am sure my three rivals felt the same. I was filled with an almost overwhelming sense of gratitude toward everyone who had helped me along that long, eighteen-month journey from Samashki to London. There was smuggler Isa and his brothers Muhammad and Musa, as well as Commander Ali. There was the blacksmith, Alkhazur, Uncle Larry Sheets, Steve Coppen, Danny Schechter, and, of course, Hussein. I had all or most or some of their names written on a napkin tucked in my tux. Yes, I had ducked off to the bathroom before entering the auditorium to scribble down some quick notes of acceptance and thanks, because I had come to understand something I had never before felt.

I wanted us to win.

"And the winner of the Rory Peck Prize for 1996 is . . ."

A great wave rolled up from the darkened audience toward the stage as I stuck out my hand to congratulate Jane Kokan. She was stepping up to the podium to receive a state-of-the-art digital camera kit, a prize that symbolized independence for any freelancer. But it also symbolized something else—tacit encouragement for the first living winner of the Rory Peck Award to go out and do something even more insane than the project that had landed her as a finalist, and then winner, in the grand ceremony.

Yes, Jane Kokan was being encouraged *to go back in.* And suddenly I realized that, as a mere also-ran, I was exempted from such expectations.

I did not have to go back there any more. It was over.

I had pushed my story on Samashki to the world stage and fulfilled my part of the bargain with Hussein and his men. Although ours was not the winner, a segment of the Samashki piece would be shown as part of an hour-long program on the Rory Peck Awards in a worldwide, joint broadcast of the BBC and CNN.

I had done my duty. It was over, and I could go home.

"Could we have a word?"

It was Nik Gowing, standing in front of me at the cocktail party following the awards.

"That man you featured, Hussein?" asked Gowing.

"Yes?"

"Is he still alive?"

"I don't know."

"Look," said Gowing, drawing me aside from a knot of consolers. "I don't know how to say this exactly, so let me just say it out loud. There were many at the BBC who thought you should have won this year's Rory Peck."

"Thanks," I said.

"I am not here to give you a tough-luck consolation prize," he interjected. "I am here to give you the assignment of your life, and this is it. We foreign correspondents wing our way into ghastly situations and report on them, and then just leave and move on to the next assignment with no respect to the aftermath experienced by the people with whom we experienced our brief time in hell. I ask myself again and again: *What happened* to all those people I interviewed in Sarajevo? I am back in London regaling friends with my stories of being under fire, and general danger, and the international importance of it all. But what about *them*, the people I reported on? That is what I want you to do. I want you to go *back* to Samashki. I want you to find your Hussein if he is still alive, or I want you to find his grave if he is not. I want you to gauge the impact of *your very presence* in that little town *at that time* and *now*. I want you to do *an aftermath*."

Aftermath.

It was the logical, and now funded follow-up assignment to my original, almost-award-winning story on Samashki.

It filled me with inexplicable dread.

16 DEN OF INIQUITY

Much had changed in the eighteen months since I had last been in Chechnya.

For starters, there was no longer a war.

Just at a time when Moscow had declared the operation to "restore constitutional order" in Chechnya to be over, save possibly for afew "terrorist bandits" holed up in the hills, thousands of Chechen commandos materialized from nowhere and overran Grozny in August 1996. Arriving in trucks, buses, railcars, and on foot through sewers, the nonexistent Chechen army quickly infiltrated the city, trapping some six thousand Russian soldiers in their bunkers. Under threat of the Chechens annilihating the soldiers on live television, the humiliated government of Boris Yeltsin capitulated. Russia—*Rossiya*—the country that put paid to Hitler's Third Reich, brought to its knees by a handful of Islam-inspired bandits?

The resulting cease-fire and subsequent withdrawal of all Russian military personnel from Chechen territory, negotiated by Chechen Commander-in-Chief Aslan Maskhadov and Yeltsin's National Security advisor General Alexandr Lebed, became known as the Khazavyurt Accords. They all but recognized the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria as an independent state. David had just slain Goliath, and the victorious nationalists moved back to power in the devastated capital. It was immediately renamed *Johar Kala* in memory of Djohar Dudayev, who had been killed by a Russian missile in April of that year.

But despite celebration, it was not the end of the Chechen crisis.

The first question that needed to be addressed in the de facto independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria was that of leadership. With the mercurial Dudayev dead, this logically focused on his successor. The Chechen constitution was at least clear on this point. In the event of the death or disappearance of the president, the vice-president was to step in and fulfill presidential duties until the people elected a new leader.

Dudayev's immediate successor was Vice President Zalimkhan Yandarbiyev, the main nationalist, Islamist ideologue of the Chechen revolution. A Soviet-style intellectual who described himself as "a shepherd and poet," it was Yandarbiyev who had initially invited Dudayev to come home and lead the secessionist movement.

Yandarbiyev's tenure as acting president of Chechnya was short, effectively consisting of the period between Dudayev's death in April 1996 and the presidential elections held in January 1997. During that time he was credited with two accomplishments, both of which might be regarded as related pillars of his foreign policy.

The first was allowing an infusion of foreign Muslim essentialists into Chechnya as volunteers for the cause. Generically known as Wahhabites, or followers of the rigorous version of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia, the Islamic legion came from all over the Muslim world, and even included a number of volunteers from among European and even American converts.[22] While the Kremlin sought to convince the world that these *mujahideen* numbered in the thousands, most neutral observers put the more likely number in the low hundreds—and this was a number that also included diaspora Chechens from Turkey, Jordan, and Syria, who did not regard themselves as foreigners at all.

But they did represent a distinct outlander group. Their nominal leader—or at least the man who symbolized the foreign and diaspora component in Chechnya—was a handsome Jordanian of Chechen de-

22 One was the American national Aukai Collins, who lost a leg in fighting. Cf. Amy Barrett, "Holy Warrior," *New York Times Magazine*, August 4, 2002. Collins also wrote a book entitled *My Jihad* (Guilford, Conn.: Lyons Press, 2002).

scent (some said he was actually a Bedouin from Saudi Arabia, others that he was a lesser prince from one of the Gulf Emirates) with almost feminine locks cascading down his back. He was known as Commander Khattab, a name whose mention struck fear in the breast of virtually every Russian soldier to serve in Chechnya.

There was no question of his zealotry. Schooled in the ways of holy guerrilla warfare during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and reportedly a close associate of Osama bin Laden, Khattab and his men took credit—indeed, *celebrated*—their gratuitous, no-quarter killings while at war. A popular video making the rounds showed the commander at work in the mountains, trapping an entire Russian armored column by the old trick of knocking out the first and last vehicles to block escape or retreat, and then slamming rocket-propelled grenades into those stuck in the middle. Then he and his men moved in with small arms and knives. The final frames show a blissful Khattab shouting "God is the Greatest!" while lifting what appeared to be human entrails on his bayonet. Another film that saw wide circulation as an anti-Chechen propaganda piece (and that may or may not have been shot by Khattab's personal cameraman) was a snuff clip. It portrayed several Russian *kontraktni* being executed by the tried-and-true manner of slitting their throats like ritually slaughtered animals. This was not the sort of material that endeared the Chechen cause to human rights activists, or to many Chechens, for that matter.

Adding to inter-Chechen tension was Khattab's effort to proselytize his rigorous brand of Islam. The majority of Soviet Chechens were members of one of two traditional Sufi brotherhoods—the Qaddari and Naxshabendi *tariqat*, or semisecret religious orders. Much has been made of the difference between the two, the former embracing the "active" and the latter the "passive" forms of *zikr*, or ritual remembrance of God. The wild, barn-dance stomping I had seen in Samashki was associated with the first—a quieter, meditative reflection about the nature of the universe, and clues to be gleaned by pious communion with the spirit of intervening Muslim saints was more typical of the second.

Both were regarded by the authorities in Moscow, for the duration of the Soviet Union, as fundamentally dangerous expressions of religious-based, anti-Soviet feeling—"antisocialist tendencies" that needed to be extirpated, preferably with a good dose of Marxist-Leninist Listerine, such as a stint in a *gulag* hard-labor colony. Khattab's attitude toward the traditional Sufi brotherhoods that had sustained the Chechen spirit during the seventy years of commissar domination was remarkably similar to—well, to that of the commissars. He regarded the practice of *zikr* in all its forms, and other Sufi practices, such as the visitation of saints' graves, as nothing short of polytheistic, un-Islamic ignorance that had to be banished from the land. I include the following exegesis from the (Internet) pen of Khattab to give the reader a taste of the man's theological thinking:

> *It is regrettable that simple, uneducated Muslims [of the Caucasus] have failed to understand the true meaning of worship. In their ignorance, it is not Allah they worship, and they fall into the sin of polytheism, which places a man outside religion. This occurs when they pray to dead prophets, to the friends of Allah . . . and when they march in procession around the graves and the tombs of [these worthies], just as they would around the Kaaba. . . . But if such simple and ignorant people are guilty of polytheism because they are ignorant, and because they could not understand what true worship is, some justification can be found for them. [But] . . . how can we justify the learned scholars who do understand that these simple people have become bogged down in polytheism, which places a man outside religion, yet at the same time pass down decisions that this polytheism . . . is the best way to express love for the prophets, the friends of Allah? . . . Do these learned men have no fear, as they lead the simple people to unbelief?!*[23]

23 Umar ibn Al Khattab, "How We Understand Monotheism," trans. Joan Beecher Eichrodt. The excerpt quoted here is available on-line at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/chechnya-sl/message/147 (accessed July 9, 2003).

The passage might be translated thusly: Traditional Sufi Islam is heresy; traditional leaders are guiltier than their followers for leading the masses into the cardinal sin of *shirk*, or polytheism.

A major rift had just opened in Chechen society between the pure and unclean—and between the majority of local Chechens who only wanted to rebuild their shattered lives, and the Wahhabi outlanders who had arrived to cleanse Chechnya first of the godless Russians, and next of apostates, before then maybe exporting their pristine version of Islam and attendant holy war to neighboring territories, such as Dagestan.

While it is not entirely fair to blame Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev exclusively for this development, there is little question that he was the man who left the door ajar, and with dire consequences. Perhaps one might better ask the uncomfortable question of just who else, aside from the Islamic fundamentalist fringe, was interested in aiding the Chechens. Certainly not the West. And as the Turkish saying has it, "a drowning man will clutch a snake swimming on the water."

Yandarbiyev's other contribution as acting president was actually quite different and arguably a complete contradiction of his apparent embrace of the Wahhabis. Specifically, it was he who opened a window on the world for Chechnya in the form of a real foreign ministry. Curiously, it was not located in shattered Grozny, but in a luxury suburb of Bebek, along the shores of the Bosphorus in Istanbul. In addition to the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rouslan Chimaev, the Minister of Health, Dr. Umar Hambiev, also made Istanbul the seat of his activities, while other ranking officials in the Chechen government came and went with frequency, making the townhouse almost a government in exile.

"To say 'government abroad' is more correct," said my old friend Eduard Khatchoukaev, the former Deputy Director for Foreign Economic Relations of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, whom I had met in prewar Grozny. "But 'government ex-territorio' is better."

Good old "Edik." Always depend on him for a colorful quote. His new title described him as being Chief of Department of Foreign Credit and Investment in the Chechen Republic. The last time I had

seen him he had been nothing more than a man on the run, hiding out in a Baku basement during a new Ramadan, fasting and predicting that not only would Djohar Dudayev emerge as a "serious personality" in any post-Yeltsin government in Russia, but that the real winner of the Russo–Chechen war would be Germany. He did not bother to explain.

"Mark my words," Edik had said before sort of drifting back into a coma induced by his fast.

The next quote he gave me in Istanbul that autumn of 1996 was a little more chilling, and verged on being a threat. It concerned the question of who had killed Djohar Dudayev six months before, and what the Chechens aimed to do about it.

"We will make the murderers pay," said Edik, handing me a printed photograph published in a Moscow newspaper. It showed the Chechen president standing next to his jeep with his hand on a telephone receiver and literally staring up at the cross-hair target reader of the missile nose cone that was about to blow him to bits. Edik informed me that it was actually an American projectile, as evidenced by some technical information written in English pertaining to the guidance system. For me, the photograph was such an obvious hoax that it was almost laughable. But Edik seemed to believe it, as did others. It was not Russia, *but the United States* that had assassinated the Chechen president as part of some larger, imperialist plot designed to . . . what?

"Rule the world," said Edik cryptically.

At least this time he did not accuse me of asking him black-and-white questions about multicolor subjects that his grandfather could not understand.

Then he set me up to interview Dudayev's widow, Alla Dudayeva, who just happened to be in town and, indeed, in the next room.

A small ethnic Russian woman (and a Soviet officer's daughter) from Estonia who fancied herself an artist, Alla Dudayeva had been present at the time of the killing of her husband near the village of Gekhi-Chu, and gave me a completely different account of how it happened. Her description of the sudden '*woosh*' suggested that the projectile that killed Dudayev was actually a laser-guided artillery shell

called in by hidden spotters—adding yet another version to the growing conspiracy list. This now included everything from Edik's American missile theory to a related twist that had an American AWACs airplane feeding the Russians the coordinates of Dudayev's satellite phone while the Chechen president waited on hold to speak with Bill Clinton. Variations of this theme had Dudayev talking with a trusted interlocutor in Moscow, making a call to a Moroccan intermediary and chatting with the Boston-based academic Diane Roazen. These versions agree that Dudayev was rudely interrupted mid-sentence by a direct projectile hit trained on his telephone signal, and instantly killed. Still another twist has the Russians dropping a concussion bomb that killed Dudayev horribly and slowly by shattering bodily organs from the inside out, and another version that it was all a sham, and that Djohar Dudayev was still alive, but in necessary Occlusion. He would remain in hiding until Grozny was liberated, when he would return in Mahdi-like form to resume his presidency. But that holy day had come and gone, and even Alla Dudayeva dismissed the idea of her husband's returning from the grave as nonsense.

"My husband was only one of many martyrs who died for Chechen independence," she said softly. "Our task now is to make sure their deaths were not in vain."

Then she thoughtfully gave me an autographed poem and showed me a photographic album of her paintings, all of which had been incinerated in Grozny.

The man formally responsible for the Chechen Foreign Ministry in Istanbul may have been Acting President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, but the man on the ground (and paying the rent) was Khoj Akhmet Noukhayev. Khoj Akhmet (standard variations on his name include Hajj Ahmad Nukaev) was the cool-to-cold former head of Dudayev's security apparatus, and a man who seemed to tolerate reports in the foreign media that described him as the ultimate Chechen mafioso so long as said reports credited him with being a state-building (or maybe state-supplanting) philosopher. The cash for the Bebek digs, for ex-

ample, seems to have come not from the exchequer of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in Grozny (was there such an office?) but from Adnan Khashoggi (an Arabized form of the word Kashikji, or "Spoon-maker"), the globe-trotting Saudi business tycoon and international weapons dealer. Khoj Akhmet and Khashoggi appeared together at a Crans Montana Forum, an annual economic event held in Switzerland (that clearly attempted to rival the Davos World Economic Affairs forums) designed to bring together leading personalities from the business and political worlds for a little multilateral chitchat and discreet deal making.

It was there that Noukhayev first put on the table the idea of creating a "Caucasus Chamber of Commerce," an interesting concept, given the convoluted politics of the region, that focused on devolution from state structures to those of the clan. Thus, on a theoretical level, Khoj Akhmet was seeking to destroy, or at least supplant, the state his operation was allegedly put in place to represent, while businessman Khashoggi announced that he had taken such a keen interest in newly independent Chechnya that he was willing to cough up one hundred million dollars to set up a joint investment bank.

Another of Yanderbayev's men in Istanbul—and indeed, Noukhayev's right-hand man—was Mansour Maciej Jachimczyk, a Polish Jew who had first converted to Catholicism when studying at Oxford, before then becoming a double apostate by next adopting Islam. Religious concerns or definitions aside, his crowded business card announced him to be not only the *Secretary General of the International Roundtable for the Reconstruction of Chechnya, Peace in the Caucasus and Democracy in Russia*, but also the *Chief Advisor to the Government of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria on Foreign Affairs and Foreign Economic Relations.*

On a more casual level, he labeled himself a "Chechen agent," a term that carried not only the familiar associations with dark deeds of espionage, but entertainment. Assisted by Khashoggi's third wife, Shahpari, and a best-left-nameless CPA for the stars in Los Angeles, Mansour orchestrated a grand project to entice Elizabeth Taylor and

Julio Iglesias to bombed-out Grozny to act as hosts for a one-thousand-dollar-a-plate Chechen war orphan benefit.

What? A Polish Jewish–Catholic convert to Sufi Islam fronting for a Saudi arms merchant supporting a former KGB hit man semiassociated with Osama bin Laden in league with Liz Taylor and Julio Iglesias, all sitting around the same one thousand dollars-a-plate benefit dinner to aid Chechen children in Grozny?

Well, yes—but who says geopolitics can't be fun?

Actually, seeing old violet eyes in Grozny would have been a great coup, but then Liz got brain cancer and had to cancel. After her recovery, however, there she was with Julio, sitting at Mansour and Khoj Akhmed's table for the slightly postponed charity bash, although for logistical reasons it had been transferred from downtown Grozny to Istanbul's spectacularly expensive Ciragan Palace Hotel on the middle Bosphorus. The next stop for Mansour and Khoj Akhmet was London, for a meeting with Baroness Margaret Thatcher and other Tory lords interested in Chechnya's oil pipeline schemes. The pair got around.

Meanwhile, in independent Chechnya itself, the charred and bloody landscape where heroes once fought was falling into the grip of nameless fear and dread. Friends were only friends-apparent. Trusted guides and protectors could turn. No one really knew who was who anymore. People had become booty to be exchanged for cash ransoms; Russian television reporters could fetch millions, and foreigners—well, it was assumed that all were worth their weight in gold, if you wanted to bother keeping them alive.

The most celebrated case of foreigners disappearing in Chechnya belonged to the unfortunate American humanitarian aid worker, Fred Cuny, who went missing at the time of the Samashki Massacre in the Spring of 1995. Subsequent consensus suggests that Cuny had pushed a bridge too far, and was executed by Chechen rebels in the vicinity of Fortress Bamut on suspicion of being a Russian spy.

But Cuny was not the only outlander to go missing at the hands of

suspicious guards, rapacious kidnappers, or psychotic killers. Arguably the most horrible incident was when six Red Cross workers were slaughtered in their sleep in the town of Novi Atagi in November 1996. Although a shroud of conspiracy continues to obscure the identities of the killers, word had it that, far from being a murderous plot hatched by Moscow that was designed to destabilize Chechnya and drive all foreign observers from the country—which was the effective result—the killings were carried out by disgruntled security men who thought they would teach the Red Cross a lesson for declining the group's professional "protection" services. Equally awful was the beheading of four British Telecom workers, abducted for ransom by unknowns and then killed when the gang felt the antikidnapping squad on their trail was getting too close.

The fate dealt out to a pair of devoted British aid workers in a Grozny orphanage, Jonathan James and Camilla Carr, was only marginally less harsh: Captured for ransom, they were tortured and raped, but ultimately freed by Aslan Maskhadov's security detail.

The nagging question of whether the kidnappers and the antikidnapping security squads were not possibly made up of the same people working in collusion seemed to be answered, at least for me, by the case of Fazil Özen, president of the Chechen Solidarity Committee in Istanbul, whom I had first met way back when, in the winter of 1995, even before my first trip to Samashki.

Inspired by the example of other diasporas, the Chechen Solidarity Committee in Istanbul had raised and then pumped in some ten million dollars in material aid to *the homeland*, a place most diaspora Chechens living in Turkey had never seen, and where a language was spoken—*Noxchi Mot*—that they had long forgotten.

It was the same story of a romanticized relationship of people in diaspora toward their distant, beleaguered kinsmen, as experienced by such disparate peoples as the Los Angeles Armenians, Boston Irish, and New York Jews. Find a leader, send the money.

Some aid took the form of rented satellite time, so that Chechen television could continue to broadcast *their* idea of news, free of Moscow's informational feed. Wireless communication equipment was

smuggled in to aid fighters in the mountains. Getting material (and military) aid past Russian checkpoints was a little trickier and usually took the form of sending trusted couriers into Chechnya, who would bribe their way past the guards and then deliver high density aid—that is, hard cold cash.

"Djohar knows what he needs better than we do," Fazil had explained to me back in the winter of 1995–96. "The Russian soldiers sell everything just to raise the funds to run away. There is no need for us to smuggle in weapons when the fighters can bargain for them and buy them on the spot."

That arrangement worked well enough, until April 21, 1996. That was the day Djohar Dudayev was killed, allegedly by a guided missile that homed in on the satellite telephone he was using. The telephone and the expenses associated with its use were a gift of the diaspora community, where the shock of his death was arguably greater than in Chechnya itself.

I learned about Dudayev's death from Fazil. It was very early in the morning in Montana when the telephone rang. I picked it up, heard the distinctive hum of an international call, waited for it to subside, and then found myself listening to a sobbing Fazil Özen on the Istanbul end of the line.

"I am calling you because I do not know who else to talk to," wept Fazil. "They killed Djohar today, but everyone has a different version, and I have no idea whom to trust!"

He related the four or five or eight theories, including the one that Fazil had initially clung to for the first few hours: That all reports of Dudayev's death were greatly exaggerated, and just another example of Russian disinformation. That one was punctured fairly quickly. Within hours of the announcement that the President was dead, seemingly every Chechen in Istanbul was advertising himself as Dudayev's appointed heir—and demanding access to the monetary and material aid collected by the Istanbul Solidarity Committee.

Fazil Özen's immediate response to the announcement that Dudayev had been killed was to take revenge by volunteering to fight as a guerrilla.

"Fazil," I cautioned him. "You are not a soldier, you do not know the country, you do not know the factions, you do not even really know enough Chechen to respond if some one tells you to duck because there is an incoming shell, or to shoot because you have fallen into a trap."

"This is true," he replied.

"Your role in the *dava* (cause) is to provide the second line of support," I said. "You have raised and sent millions of dollars. Don't do what you are not cut out for. You are not a fighter. If you try to be, you will only end up as a corpse. Don't go."

Of course Fazil went. Not as a fighter per se, but as the head of a tiny, over-the-mountain delegation from the diaspora to check out the new Chechen leadership in the person of Aslan Maskhadov, the wily Chechen military commander who would bring the Russian Army to its knees.

"You see, I did not listen to you—I went!" beamed Fazil Özen the next time I saw him in Istanbul after the Russian collapse. He was sitting beneath a large, grainy slide-to-print color photograph of himself standing next to a triumphant and grinning Maskhadov. "No one thought we could do it—staring down the Russian bear!—and yet we did. And we, as members of the Chechen community in diaspora, would like to think that we played our small part in this legendary triumph!"

The Chechens might seem to have won an incredible victory against tremendous odds, but it was at the price of having lost up to a tenth of the population, with survivors living in an utterly destroyed landscape filled with refugees, orphans, and murderous psychopaths—even while a five-way power struggle began for the right to claim the mantle of the fallen Djohar Dudayev. Individuals would appear in Istanbul demanding money for a gaggle of different field commanders—and accuse Fazil of embezzlement of charity funds when he did not immediately fork over cash.

Inevitably, the question of fraud and misappropriation had even begun to touch on the reputation of the president of the Solidarity Committee, Fazil himself. His name was on the bank account in Istanbul

to which donors might wire funds; but so were the names of the Vice-President and the Treasurer. Despite the fact that all incoming and outgoing funds had been painstakingly recorded and even registered with the Turkish tax officials, vicious gossip had it that Fazil had used some of the money for his own pleasure. For a man who had devoted the last few years of his life to the Chechen cause—almost to the point of destroying his marriage through neglect—it was not a happy time.

Equipped with copies of the documents concerning all cash transfers made by a score of couriers over the course of two years, he set off for Grozny to set the record straight.

Significantly, it was Fazil's first legal trip to Chechnya. Rather than trudging over mountains or hiding in the trunk of a car, he and a companion applied for and received a visa to visit the Russian Federation, and flew from Istanbul to Nalchik, capital of the tiny North Caucasus republic of Kabardino-Balkaria. From there they made their way by road across the Republic of Ingushetia and then across the frontier into "free" Chechnya.

In Grozny, Fazil Özen began his business of resolving any misunderstandings about the purloined or misappropriated aid. He had meetings with old friends, such as President Maskhadov and the redoubtable Shamil Basayev, now Minister for Industry. All indications are that those contacts were friendly. There were, no doubt, other contacts and meetings, too, pertaining to various aid projects to be funded by the diaspora—a new school, perhaps, as well as scholarships for Chechen students in Turkish universities.

Business accomplished and name cleared, Fazil and his companion traveled to the town of Shali, located in the foothills of the towering Caucasus mountain range, and from there went to spend the last night in a neighboring village. One day, two, and then a week with no news. Fazil and his companion had been swallowed up by the earth. And in Chechnya, that meant only one thing. Kidnappers. But who, and why?

Fazil and his friend were not heard from again for eight months. And when they emerged from the last of a series of cellars and caves, they were completely emaciated and wearing chest-long beards caked with mud. They had become, Fazil later told me, experts in "the be-

havior of ants" and decent portrait artists. To relieve boredom, he and a cell mate had sketched pictures of each other in the caked-dirt filth that built up on their trousers.

The most frightening moment aside from the original capture, he informed me, came on the last day of captivity, when the two were dragged from their pit and brought into Grozny for potential release, only to be returned to another dungeon that evening.

"I broke down and wept, because I was sure that signaled a breakdown in negotiations, and that our captors would kill us," he recalled. "Then one of the guards, who was not supposed to talk to us, tried to calm me by saying that we would be released at eleven that night. I was sure he was lying. But at a quarter to eleven our guards just disappeared into the night, and fifteen minutes later our liberators appeared. In other words, our kidnappers and liberators were the same people."

And the rationale for kidnapping Fazil in the first place?

"They accused me of using the Solidarity Committee funds for my own purposes. I replied that I had not taken a dime, but even sold my car for the cause. They said that meant I was not a true Chechen, because a real Chechen would of course steal half the money. That is when my heart broke, and when I returned to Turkey I kissed the tarmac of the airport. I never want to see that place again."

That was the confused atmosphere of Chechnya I planned to walk into for my Aftermath assignment for the BBC.

17 THE LAW OF THE MOUNTAINS

I planned my *Return to Samashki* assignment to overlap with the Chechen presidential elections of January 1997. The government of Acting President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, and the military forces under the command of victorious General Aslan Maskhadov, had promised complete security for all foreign journalists and election observers who decided to pop into the country to monitor the polls.

The obvious problem with this pledge was whether the "rogue elements," held responsible for the daily diet of murder and mayhem before the elections, would now listen to the country's leadership and desist from their destabilizing activities. More to the point, if the successful secessionist government could not control said elements from kidnapping and killing foreigners when there were almost no foreign targets in the country, how could the government possibly control the same unidentified elements from kidnapping foreigners leading up to election day, when there would be more exposed targets than ever before?

Formally, the presidential elections were being held to replace the martyred Djohar Dudayev. The field of candidates was led by Aslan Maskhadov, the silent and successful general of the resistance campaign and architect of the reconquest of Grozny that had resulted in the de facto independence of Chechnya from the Russian Federation. General Maskhadov was the clear favorite among all segments of Chechen society, but particularly among those folks who might be called traditional conservatives. He also commanded a grudging respect from the Russian military, and thus from a Kremlin perspective

was viewed as a man with whom the Yeltsin government could do business.

Next came Shamil Basayev, the flamboyant 35-year-old field commander and Maskhadov deputy. Basayev was favored by the radical youth, who were not satisfied with some of the fuzzier points of the Khazavyurt Accords negotiated by Maskhadov that had formally ended the Chechen–Russian war. The fuzziest of all was the postponing of Chechnya's de jure status as being a state legally independent from Russian for a period of five years. As for Moscow's attitude toward Basayev, quite simply he was known as the most wanted man in Russia.

The dark horse candidate in the elections was Acting President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev. Although the principal ideologue of the Chechen Revolution, his candidacy was tainted in the eyes of many locals by the fact that he had never been a combatant, and stained in the eyes of many outside observers by real or perceived connections to the "Wahhabi" foreign fighters, such as Khattab.

A handful of other candidates, most of whom were successful unit commanders, added color, if little contention, to the field.

Aside from specific political agendas and the personal style of the candidates, the main issue at hand was security, or rather the lack of it, throughout the land. The appalling murder of six Red Cross workers who had been bludgeoned to death in their sleep in Novi Atagi a month before remained unsolved, and scores of would-be international election monitors had canceled their trips to Chechnya, fearing for their lives.

This was a severe blow to whoever might eventually win the presidency, as well as to Chechnya as a whole, as the very act of monitoring elections suggested some tacit recognition of the renegade state. The head of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe mission to Chechnya, Swiss diplomat Tim Guldermann, had invested a huge amount of personal effort and political capital to convince Moscow to accept the concept of Chechnya holding any elections at all. But his pleas to other OSCE states to send official observers to Grozny fell largely on deaf ears due to security concerns, and with the excep-

tion of a group of Polish monitors brought down from Moscow by the mysterious Mansour Jachimczyk (who was simultaneously campaigning for Yandarbiyev), official OSCE attendance was embarrassingly thin.

Not so with the media. Every news agency and newspaper and television station with reporters based in Russia, both local and foreign, seemed to have descended on Grozny. Lawrence Sheets had even brought up his cook from Tbilisi to break the monotony of the standard Chechen chow of boiled beef with fried green garlic with some Georgian-style home cookin', and the so-called "Reuters House" near the bazaar soon became a veritable soup kitchen for the small army of reporters, cameramen, photographers, translators, drivers, and guards, whether they were working for Reuters or not. The most curious addition to the table, if not exactly a guest, was a wandering American youth dressed up in Pashtun garb. He burst into the Reuters House one night looking for a companion to go "meet the Muslims" in the mountains. We threw him out. To this day, I wonder if he was not John Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban," on his way to deepest, darkest Afghanistan, looking for one of Khattab's training camps.

Unlike the crowd of foreign press, human rights advocates, and election observers from the former Eastern Bloc, I was not in Chechnya to track presidential poll results. My focus was Samashki. And almost without thinking about how easy it would be for anyone to kidnap me—a solo foreigner traveling alone at dusk—I jumped in the first car I found, and began my journey home, unsure of what I would find.

When did it first dawn on me that people were looking at me in a peculiar way?

Was it that first knot of men huddled over a tire fire near the burnt-out shell of the central school building who seemed unpleasantly surprised to see me? Or was it that attenuated greeting, almost sour, delivered by the blacksmith, Alkhazur?

The young man I found "brick farming" in the ruins of a shattered building picked up a piece of rubble and threw it at me.

Something was wrong, very wrong, and I knew it before knocking on the courtyard door, a long-lost son returned.

"As-salam aleikum!" I cried in my best Chechen, as the short, stocky form of Hussein's father revealed itself in the half-open gate, illuminated by a candle. *"Marsh vogil!"*

"Barkal," he muttered gruffly. "Thanks."

While he had never been exactly gushingly friendly, he now seemed to almost resent my appearance at his door. It opened no wider.

"Hussein is away."

Away! That meant Hussein was still alive!

"Will he be back soon?" I asked, waiting at the door.

"No," came the stone-cold reply.

"And Ussam?" I asked, referring to Hussein's younger brother.

"In Slepsovski, on business."

It was time to take stock of this situation.

I was back in Samashki. Hussein was alive but gone. His father was cool to cold. Other people were throwing bricks at me when not casting me the evil eye.

Something was wrong.

"Can I wait for him here?"

A moment's pause.

"Ok," he said at last, and I entered, having forced myself upon Hussein's household by evoking the Law of the Mountains pertaining to persistent guests and strangers.

If the house had sustained any damage over the last eighteen months, it was not apparent. But the dwelling, sparsely furnished during the best of times, was completely empty. A single spring bed and mattress were set in the back room.

Hussein's father stood there and studied me in silence. He did not smile.

What the hell was going on here?

I had a copy of the *Rights and Wrongs* broadcast tape in my bags, as well as a photocopy of a *Soldier of Fortune* article I had written entitled "Weapons Bizarre." It had to do with the Chechens' ability to create a homemade arsenal during the war, ranging from shoulder-

fired surface-to-air missiles culled from downed helicopters, to things like Hussein's gigantic land mine made from a rocket warhead.

"These are for you," I said, offering the material to the elder man.

"Hussein," he breathed, studying the pictures.

"Please," I said. "They are yours to keep as a memory of those bad times."

"Thanks," he said, and then shuffled out the door. "Those bad times."

"Toms."

It was Hussein's father, the man whose name I never knew, sitting down on my bed in the dark, candle in his hand. It was a peculiar moment, almost paternal, nearly intimate—and utterly against Chechen tradition. The Law of the Mountains did not allow elders to act in such a casual way.

"You know the situation here is bad," he said, speaking without looking at me, staring straight ahead to the shadow of his candle dancing on the opposite wall.

"Yes," I replied, waiting.

"The war has stopped and the Russians are gone . . ."

"Yes."

"Please listen," he said, placing his hand on my knee. "*Then,* you knew who the enemy was and where he stood. *Now,* it is much more dangerous. The enemy is all around and you do not know who he is. Do you understand me?"

"Please go on," I said.

A queer knot was forming in my stomach, in my soul. I *knew* where this was heading, and did not want it to go there.

"Hussein is in Kazakhstan, and he will not be coming back."

"Why?"

"They say he was a traitor, and brought war to Samashki."

"Who?"

"The elders, the ones who surrendered the town when you were here."

"But we know that . . ."

"Please listen," he cut me off. "There is more."

"I am listening," I said, the knot in my stomach growing into a twisted lump.

"They say he was not alone in his betrayal," said Hussein's father, speaking about his son. "They say a KGB agent worked with him to take pictures of the town's defenses."

I did not even need to hear the rest. The twisted lump had turned to burning steel, exploding in my gut and sending singeing pieces of shrapnel to every nerve in my body.

I was on fire.

"Toms," he said, now looking me in the eye and patting my knee with a paternal hand. "It is very dangerous for you to be here at all."

I was almost giddy with fear and decades away from sleep.

That KGB agent was me.

Ussam returned toward dawn and found me chain-smoking in the kitchen.

"You" he said, in a tone that made me very worried, knowing now what I did.

Then his father entered and spoke just three words.

"I told him," said the elder man, referring to me. "Now you talk."

The Law of the Mountains; an elder's command. *Kanun.*

Ussam stared at me with malignant eyes for a moment, looked back at his father, back at me, and then sat down on the floor, back propped against the far wall, sighing.

"Talk," said his father.

"Talk," I asked, almost pleading.

It took hours to extract, but Ussam filled in the details.

Of course I was filming.

"After the Mothers' March through Samashki, things got very bad, and the elders wanted to surrender the town," Ussam related, referring to the period of time bracketed by my escape from Samashki on March 27 and the massacre of April 7. "They demanded that Hussein go with

them to negotiate at the Post, and so he went. But in going to meet with the Russians, my brother lost the trust of the militants who wanted to fight no matter what. Still, the people pleaded, and so Hussein managed to convince most of the fighters to leave, because that is what the majority wanted, although he wanted to stay and fight as well.

"The elders were then told to collect a certain number of weapons to prove that the militants were gone. They did this, but then the Russian command changed their mind and demanded more and more, and said they would storm the town if those weapons were not delivered by their deadline. At this last session, someone shot at the returning party of elders. We thought it was the diehards shooting at Hussein.

"The Russians then said that all weapons had to be surrendered by a certain hour, and that all militants had to leave by a certain route. There were no more weapons to give, and because we did not trust the Russians, we all left and went into the forest via a different path. That is when the Russians attacked, and after that people started to say that Hussein was to blame, because he first brought war to Samashki by defending against the train, but then left it undefended and allowed the massacre. So Hussein left. He was forced to leave. God, I know how he did not want to go! I can never believe that my brother, my older brother, would ever betray his people."

Ussam twiddled his thumbs.

One—left or right?—lacked the entire nail and the top quarter of the joint.

When did he lose it, I wondered but did not ask.

"It is dangerous for you here," said Ussam. "There are people who want to kill you."

"Kill me."

"Yes."

Another long shudder down a spine that was no longer mine and along nerves made of mud.

"Do not leave the house, *Toms*," said Hussein's father. "My son Ussam shall sneak you out of town in darkness, tonight!"

"No," said Ussam, reflecting. "Perhaps if people see you on the streets, it will convince them of your true intent. If you were really a Russian agent, you would be insane to return to Samashki by yourself."

There was a certain logic to what Ussam said.

My very presence in town would either wipe the slate clean, or rid the earth of me. And if showing my face in Samashki could serve to soften the evil attitude of many people toward my person, perhaps doing so might also ameliorate the perceived sins of Hussein. Yes. I *owed* it to him to risk a public lynching, or whatever might happen to me in the street.

Head spinning with *A Tale of Two Cities* altruism mixed with a direct desire *to just bolt*, I pulled on my boots, put the BBC camera on its tripod, and stepped out into an ice-and-mud-encrusted world, not knowing if I would ever see another day.

The stares of incredulity slowly turned to frowns and then to smiles as I made my way through the familiar landscape of Samashki. Whether my presence with camera in hand helped restore Hussein's reputation in any concrete way was not immediately clear, but Ussam's conviction that insanity was the greatest proof of my innocence seemed to register with others.

I happened upon a garage being used as the Friday mosque; the real structure had been destroyed and not yet rebuilt. There, I found myself engaging in the Chechen handshake-cum-half-embrace with a dozen men I had known before, including leading members of the elders group who had banished Hussein.

Next, I stopped by Alkhazur's blacksmith shop. He was astonished to see me, as was his wife and new child. I had had no idea he was a married man.

"Don't you think it is . . . dangerous for you to be here?" he delicately asked.

"Why?"

"Oh, the kidnappers and renegades, you know," the blacksmith re-

sponded. "They say foreigners should not travel alone, but with guards assigned by the state authorities."

"I registered with the state authorities in Grozny," I said, skipping the truth for the sake of security. "They know I am in Samashki with friends—it is not so?"

Word spread, and soon people were seeking me out to swear they had never believed that business about—well, you know. Bekist, the laughing lady who collapsed in the road outside of Sernavodsk after she had related the carnage in Samashki; Commander Ali, who had twice arrested me during my first day in town nearly two years before; Akhmad Amaev, the Samuel Pepys of Samashki, who recorded literally every event in his longhand diary as it occurred. The saddest entry he read concerned the killing of his second son, gunned down by a helicopter while the sixteen-year-old was tending to a flock of sheep in a field just before the so-called Second Storming of the town in March 1996.

Still others came up to embrace me, telling me they had been told I was dead—apparent evidence of the confusion in identity between myself and the late Fred Cuny, whom members of the Western media wanted to place in Samashki, a name resonant with death and destruction.

"We thought we'd lost you, that you were shot and killed!" cackled a familiar-looking man from atop a ladder precariously leaning against an electricity pole next to a familiar-looking house. "That means you will live a long life!"

It was Isa's brother Muhammad.

Sights and sounds of Samashki, my Samashki, swirled around my head.

A *zikr* for a recently deceased neighbor, where the youth and elders joined together in the wild religious ceremony that so thoroughly defined the Chechen soul; a vodka bust performed by the newly established morality police, raiding some poor woman's stash on a tip, and smashing two dozen bottles of booze at her curbside; a wedding party at the house of the beehive-keeping bomb maker who had repaired my battery charger, the monotonous thump of gunfire now replaced

with a wild Caucasian dance band, consisting of an out-of-tune accordion and the seat of a wooden chair used for a drum; another feast in my honor, the table sagging under a load of boiled beef, bowls of boiled beef broth, and pickled tomatoes (but this time supplemented with an illicit bottle of vodka); a school in a makeshift classroom in the basement of the bombed-out collective farm cannery, the walls festooned with survival art depicting jets and tanks with Russian emblems on them, and burning houses with the Chechen flag, where the children were using Soviet-era textbooks to work on a certain Russian plural possessive noun ending.

". . . and then the city was in the hands of the Bolsheviks," read their teacher.

". . . then the city was in the hands of the Bolsheviks," the children repeated.

". . . yes, the *Bolshyvikov* . . ."

I filmed it all, and more. I was recording a town of sorrow come back to life.

The Russian soldiers might have gone, but their signature of death and destruction was everywhere to be seen. Samashki appeared to have been used as a test firing range for artillery shells and vacuum bombs during the so-called "second storming" of the town. The remnants of the miniature parachutes that held the so-called "vacuum bombs" aloft before their in-air explosion still clung to twisted pieces of rebar sticking up from masonry rubble throughout the town, usually with a telltale, perfectly symmetrical twenty-meter gouge in the earth nearby.

I remembered secondhand reports of the second storming posted on the Internet by Chris Hunter, the leader of the Quaker component of the Soldiers' Mothers' March. Quoting fleeing refugees, he had described a three- or four-day assault on the town in which neighborhoods were effectively erased from the map. When and why the Russian soldiers had left, necessitating their recapture of the town, remained unclear.

"We forced them out, and then we fought back," explained Ahmed

Amaev's first son, Musa, the body-armor garment maker associated with Hussein's platoon of 1995, and the man I had nicknamed "Little Joe" of *Ponderosa* fame. He filled in the details of the second storming of Samashki, which sounded more horrific than the first, with one notable exception. The Russian Army never got back in the town.

"The federals issued an ultimatum that we were to demilitarize, just like in 1995," he said, taking me on a quick tour of the front-line positions. "This time, we fighters sent all the elders, women, and children away—into the forest via a sanitary corridor, or into shelters. Then we let the federals have it."

According to Musa, the federals—meaning, the Russians—lost up to a thousand men and maybe one hundred pieces of armor before they retreated. The lynchpin defensive position was the three-story red brick house on the northwest edge of town, which I had used as one of my front-line filming positions so many months before. It was now a pile of red brick rubble, with shell casings crunching under every step as we inspected the destruction.

"Many were martyred," said Musa bitterly. "But the federals never entered the town."

Decorated for bravery on multiple occasions since then, Musa had climbed up the ladder, from being Hussein's tailor to becoming a captain in the antiterror police based in Grozny—effectively, Chechen KGB. He had heard of the rumors about my alleged collusion with the federals in the Samashki massacre, but had dismissed them out of hand. But what he had to say about Hussein was more telling.

"I never believed the business about his being a Russian agent for a moment," said Musa. "And as for how Samashki was stripped of its defenders by Hussein and the elders just before the massacre, well, my father is Ahmad Amaev, one of the elders in question. I know what happened. Everyone was culpable. But as for Hussein, he has no place in Samashki not because of the massacre in April, but because of the battle of the second storming last year. Now do you understand why your friend Hussein is not welcome?"

He let the question hang in the air for a moment, and then answered it himself.

"He was not here," said Musa with finality.

We were then standing in the Samashki cemetery, the place where Hussein's son born on February 23 was buried, the boy who had never been able to celebrate a birthday because he had been cursed to come into the world on the Chechen national day of sorrow. I could not find the grave; I did not look for it. There were too many new ones, and those of the bravely fallen were marked with tall flagpoles, lest future generations forget the feats of the fallen during Samashki's days of need.

The Law of the Mountains.

Commander-in-Chief, General Aslan Maskhadov won the presidential elections by a landslide, with war hero Shamil Basayev coming in second, while poet and political theorist Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev took a distant third, collecting less than ten percent. None of this was surprising. The most notable thing about the polls, in fact, was how enthusiastic people were to line up and cast their ballots, and how proud they were to have participated in the freest and fairest voting the election- and referendum-drenched post-Soviet lands had ever seen.

And, with the elections over, the press and observers packed their bags to leave, flying back to Moscow, and then on to destinations such as Warsaw, London, and Rome.

It was time for me to depart as well, but in a rather different direction—a three-thousand-mile trek East to a dot on the map of Kazakhstan that identified the place as a town called Little Hope.

It was Hussein's hideout, and I had to go.

"Bring this letter to my son," instructed Hussein's father, handing me a folded envelope. "Tell him the potato crop was good this year."

"Barkal," I said in my best Chechen, hoisting my bags to my shoulder. *"Adik yurl."*

"Adik dali," he said, wrapping an arm around me.

18 A TOWN CALLED HOPE

The made-under-license Fiat they call a *Djiguli* lurched off snowpack and slid toward the shoulder of the road while another truck trundled by, splattering us with slush and gravel. In summer, the road leading north from Alma Ata was a normal two-lane highway, probably filled with potholes. But in February 1997, long stretches had been reduced to a one-lane track of packed snow and ice creased by two trenches, marking the impact of a thousand wheels passing. The result was that every time two vehicles met, one had to give way by climbing out of the twin wheel ruts and off the road, waiting while the other went by. In that most of the oncoming traffic consisted of large trucks, this meant we had become used to being the ones forced off the road.

Vladimir, my skinny little half-Jewish, half-Korean driver, turned off the engine to save gas and I lit another cigarette. I figured we had come about three hundred kilometers in twelve hours and had another one hundred kilometers or so to go. Our destination was the address on the envelope Hussein's father had given me, a town whose name in Russian meant "Little Hope." The problem was that no one seemed to know exactly where it was. Most towns in Kazakhstan had had their names changed from Russian to Kazakh since independence in 1991, and memories of the old names were fading fast.

So was the day. The sun was setting somewhere in the great hazy grayness that was both earth and sky in the Kazakh winter steppe, and it was getting very, very cold again. And Vladimir's car would not restart. I stood on the frozen tarmac while he started to fiddle with

the engine and pulled out another smoke. I could not taste the burning tobacco for the cold, and it was impossible to distinguish what was smoke and what was exhaled breath turning to instant steam.

"Hold this," said Valdimir, putting pliers in my hand. "And put your hand on the *Prexodilitisa Vam Oxdeylnovost* when I jiggle the *Krastvernix Otonomskildelnya!*"

My largely self-taught Russian was perfectly adequate—indeed fluent—for situations such as bombardments, hostage taking, refugee-related affairs, and general death and destruction. *War Russian,* I called it. But now I was being faced with *Mechanical Russian,* and aside from the occasional verb such as "give me" or "take this," I did not understand a word. Nor did I really and truly understand what I was doing tracing Hussein to his Kazakhstan exile. It had been almost two years since we had met, that second or third night in Samashki, and a cold and sober review of our relationship might have been summed up as follows:

"A foreign journalist lands in a small town in a small country at war. He somehow befriends a leader of said small community and convinces said leader to allow the foreigner to stay. The foreigner also gains access to the community's secrets, such as its defense system. After a relatively short period of time as the guest of the leader, the foreigner leaves. Almost immediately thereafter, the small community is subjected to hell by its enemies. Many people logically assume that the foreigner who left with the town's secrets right before its destruction might have had something to do with that destruction. Because the foreigner is no longer around, not illogically they focus their wrath on the leader who befriended the foreigner and gave him access to the town's secrets. The angry townspeople then drive the leader that befriended the foreigner out of town. The foreigner, meanwhile, remains blissfully oblivious to the impact of his very presence in the small community in the small country at war, and particularly the impact his presence has had on the life of the expelled leader because the foreigner was only there observing."

Yes, that was it. The foreigner was not an actor; he was merely observing, and thus innocent of any crime, or hurt, or fallout.

Not. It was all much more like a real-life, warped paraphrase of the Heisenberg chaos theory about the observer affecting the observed.

And more. The observer, oblivious to the fact that he has affected anything other than his own career enhancement, now assumes that the observed will respond in a positive manner to being put under the microscope again.

Said I to myself: *What you really want is a film crew, recording your "Look, It's Your Life!" knock on the door, Hussein's opening it a crack to ask who stands outside, his realization that it is the great foreign correspondent who participated directly or indirectly in the trial-by-innuendo that ended with him getting run out of town—and you still expect Hussein to give you and your driver a bed? Get real! Be happy if he does not strangle you on the front steps.*

The voice of the media mercenary replied: *Yes, get real.* Very real. *Tell this mechanical driver of yours to pull over the next time you smell a wood-burning shack and get a roof for the night. You are a media mercenary on assignment and need every piece of footage you can get to put this show together.* This Show. *Don't forget you are on assignment, Mister Truth-in-Reporting. Enough altruism. You* need *that door getting cracked open, and you* need *whatever Hussein's response is to the fact that you have now once again shown up on his doorstep, camera in hand. And you* need *it on tape. And for that you need* daylight. *Approach your prey in the full light of camera-friendly day.* Your Prey. *And remember*: You only get one shot at this.

And then the nice guy replied: *You are so tired of war and violence and all the attendant fear and anxiety that you just want to go home, home to a hole, maybe a grave. But you have come this far, way too far, by convincing other people that what you say you believe in and care about is what* they *should believe in and care about, too. Your driver will sleep in the freezing car if you tell him to.* Don't. *And, as for the need for daylight footage suggested by your media mercenary alter ego, tell him to go fuck himself. Have a little respect. Hussein is not your prey; he was your protector, and if he lets you into his house on this freezing February evening in the middle of northeastern nowhere, Kazakhstan, he will de facto have become your protector again.*

Drive on until you find his home, and hope you arrive in the middle of the night with your damned camera stuffed safely in your bags, and turned off. This is not just a "story," as your media mercenary alter ego would have you believe. This is your life.

Voices, voices.

"Let's go."

It is Vladimir the driver. Whatever he has done to the engine, we are now back on the road, rolling down the gouged track at dusk, and closing in on Little Hope with every kilometer gained, if indeed we were going in the right direction.

Consultations with a trucker, a local farmer, a kid riding a bicycle down the highway in the middle of nowhere, now at night, now 40 degrees below. A correction here, a slight overshot there, forcing a return to that still smaller, unmarked road to the right after the bridge. No more gutted tracks, just snow-covered local roads winding through another wood-smoke-stinking town without a light in sight, save for the occasional dim glow of a candle through a roadside windowpane. Climbing now, crawling uphill, the stars and half moon reveal trees on either side of the winter road. Natural national forest, or the row-upon-row work of a Soviet-style youth brigade, like the one Hussein once led in these parts? Star and moon reflections dance on the frost-wrapped boughs of dwarf pine and are a long glide down toward another nameless, smoke-infused village of wood-fired houses with no lights, despite the electrical poles lining the road.

It is past midnight by my watch, and we have been on the road since six that morning. I am about to tell Vladimir to pull over so we can sleep in the car when the headlights pick up some guy stumbling across our snow-encrusted path. He is either drunk or slipping on ice or both.

"Which way is Nadayzhdovka?" asks Vladimir.

"Zdes," replies the baffled midnight rambler. "Right here."

The house is at the end of the right-hand turn at the top of the icy road rising through town. Vladimir has to reverse out of several

deep potholes, gunning the motor and working the wheel like a rudder, and then start climbing again.

Maybe he has heard the engine at high throttle gunning uphill, the grunt and groan of an after-midnight motor negotiating the rutted road, closing on his place of exile, making its way to his door? Has he loaded a gun in anticipation of trouble and sent the kids to the cellar? I don't know. The moon has set, and it is dark, very dark, when Vladimir pulls the car in front of the very last house on that upper-right-hand lane, off the icy, potholed uphill climb through the middle of a village called Little Hope. There are no cameras blazing. There are no cameras at all. It is much, much better that we have arrived in the middle of the night and that there is no record of the moment, aside from personal memory. Some things are better when left like that.

Knock-knock.
Who's there?
An old friend.

There is a pause—and on that hiatus in the cold Kazakh night hangs the future of my one and only dear and precious but recently most miserable life.

"I knew you would come."

It is my friend Hussein, and I am three feet off the ground, held aloft in a two-armed, non-Chechen style, full embrace.

He was the first Chechen to live in the town of Little Hope, sent in as an agricultural brigade leader of the Young Communist organization called *Komsomol.*

"We were pariahs," said Hussein, explaining away seventy years of Soviet-style contradiction with minimal verbiage. "We were forced to excel—and we excelled. The Communist system may have attempted to destroy us, but the Communist system also gave us the chance to destroy it. We did so. We crept inside the party structure and took what we wanted and left what we didn't. We came close to taking over

the Soviet system. And then the democratic system that replaced communism gave us the opportunity to destroy ourselves, and we did so, too."

What began to emerge was a portrait of Hussein quite different from the romantic guerilla commander I had known in Samashki. No, not a *different* or *contradictory* portrait, but rather something far more nuanced than that black-and-white portrait of the bold and decisive man I had needed to embody the "Chechen spirit." Here was *family man* Hussein, *young Communist* Hussein, *Soviet Army Special Forces Deep-Penetration Specialist* Hussein, and *director of the local collective dairy farm* Hussein. Here was *ostracized Chechen* Hussein, who had, in effect, taken control of a Russian town in post-Soviet Kazakhstan and filled it with his own people to become *lord of the manor* Hussein, before stripping house and hearth of human, animal, and mechanical capital, throwing it all away for the kaleidoscope promise of some post-Soviet style nationalistic dream, only to see that dream explode into nightmare.

"Look at this mess," said Hussein as we toured the broken-down diary facility where he had once been boss. "There used to be a really nice cafeteria over there, and a decent after-work bar right here where we are standing. And now? Wandering steers, collapsing buildings, no gas or electricity in five years, and every girl with tits wandering off to the capital to fuck visiting American oilmen for money."

Three Kazakh kids rode up on a single horse, a blizzard whirling between them and the remnant herd of cattle in the background of my camera frame.

Yes, not only was Hussein allowing me to film these other aspects of his life, but he was encouraging me to do so.

Weird shots, weird moments: an IMZ/Ural sidecar motorcycle, unsuccessfully tow-started by attaching a rope to the tail of a horse, in hopes of bumping it to life in first gear; Musa's son, the doe-eyed Sultan, dragging up the calf to be slaughtered in my honor, then slitting its throat with a pious epithet; Hussein and his second son, Ruslan, inspecting the components of a machine gun stored in a shed for easy use; Hussein and I in the homemade *vanya*, or Russian sauna, and

his whipping me with a traditional oak branch and handing me a jar of bee pollen to absorb into my heat-opened pores, while suggesting that he invite in the Russian neighbor's big-breasted and possibly lascivious wife to give me the obligatory sauna massage.

The days passed in discussion—discussion about what went right and what went wrong and what to do. There were local history lessons, the details of which I cannot remember, because the subject matter itself, like the words of Russian-language auto mechanics, was sufficiently outside my ken that I have not so much forgotten what Hussein was speaking about so passionately, as that I never understood it well enough to remember. Details of the near Sino–Soviet war in the early 1970s that nearly brought the two Communist superpowers to self-conflagration over, it seems, precisely the chunk of northeastern Kazakhstan where Little Hope was located; Hussein and local Chechens and Kazakhs were tempted to become a fifth column against Moscow, and back the Chinese.

"It was a good thing we did not," he explained, and then his explanation was lost in nuance and obscure references that I just did not understand.

The conversations and talk lurched here and there and got corporate and confessional, including discussions of Soviet-style agriculture policy versus that in the U.S.A., when and where we determined that the macro-farms and ranches in the American West were just as damaging to the perceived ideal of small-family, land-holding farmers (as Hussein defined himself) as a *latifundia* in Argentina on the one hand, and a *Kolkoz* collective farm in the communist-socialist world on the other. Or human relationships.

"Approach a woman like a farmer does his field," advised Hussein during the course of one of the days among days, using his own family, and then clan, as examples of how to take over a village of émigré Russians in Kazakhstan, literally and legally.

His marriage and family spoke volumes about personal history and identity and belonging in the late-Soviet world.

Fatma was an ethnic Kazakh, meaning a Turkic-Mongol mixture native to Central Asia's most centrally Asian state. She had met the

young Hussein at the Russian-language agriculture institute they both attended. Presumably, sparks flew between the young *Komsomol* Chechen lad and the young *Komsomol* Kazakh girl (in their mutual language, Russian) the way sparks fly everywhere in this world. They dated. They got married. They had a family of one, two, and then three. Sociology 101 would dictate that the Chechen-Kazakh Soviet couple would speak the lingua franca of the USSR (Russian) among themselves, and pass it on as the *lingua familia* to their children.

Not. The language of the household was *Noxchi Mot*—or Chechen, the North Caucasus language of the mountains, with no lingual connection whatsoever with Russian, Turkish, or Arabic, save for the usual transfer verbs, nouns, and military terms.

"I learned Chechen from my children," said native Kazakh, Fatma. "And they learned it from their grandparents."

After his father and mother came his second brother Musa—the father of Sultan, the shy, reticent youth I had met in Samashki, and who was now back in Little Hope after his baptism of fire—and then his youngest brother, Ussam. Next, Communist Youth Party boss Hussein assigned work for other Chechens in the almost completely Russian émigré village—second cousin Shirvani, the lanky Quran reader and expert on nuclear warheads and undulant fever in sheep, then Shirvani's cousin, or brother-in-law, or both, the man named Xamid, and then others. Literally and legally, they took over the town of Little Hope.

I knew on arrival that I was there for a purpose, an obligation. Hussein had to talk his life through, and I was the receptacle into which he poured his wisdom, fears, life, and soul. It almost made no difference that I did not understand all the details.

Maybe it was better that I did not. He rambled on about his days at some Soviet-style special forces academy for deep-penetration activities, in case war broke out between the Warsaw Pact and NATO at—*where? What years?* Maybe I only use the word "ramble" because I could not follow the specifics of the subject, or *why* Hussein wanted

me to know the specifics about this or that aspect of his life. Yes, *why?*

My head was spinning with a thousand highly nuanced details about Soviet and Chechen history—the intertwining of the two, the interplay between China and Russia, or, really, the USSR, the *oh-so-specific this and that.* I would beg his or his group's pardon for a moment or two, and, on the excuse of needing to take a piss in the outhouse across the snow-bound yard, would retreat to the outhouse merely *to think,* or recover from thinking. *Is there a part of my brain that will remember this forever, even though I cannot understand it all today?*

And then the almost mocking words of the enigmatic *Chechen Deputy Minister for Nothing,* Eduard Khatchoukaev, way back when, centuries ago, in February 1994: *"You Western correspondents are idiots. You show up in our lands and try to impose your own terms of reference on us, when you do not even know how we former Soviets think, taking down notes and impressions in black and white when I am talking to you in full color. You understand us the way my great-grandfather, who does not even know what electricity is, understands the mechanical functions of a Sony television . . . a box, in front of which is a mirror, reflecting a kaleidoscope of colorful pictures."*

Yes, yes, yes.

The biggest question that must be asked is actually very simple: what right do you have to claim to understand a thing that Hussein has to say?

Then there was Samashki, the Place of Deer.

Following his father's lead—and using his position as boss of the local collective in the no-longer-Soviet dairy farm town, Little Hope, in newly independent and decidedly chaotic Kazakhstan, to virtually strip it of resources—Hussein decided to transfer his life back to the newly independent homeland of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria in 1993.

This was a major step, sort of like, say, the Irish-American director

of a dude ranch in Montana suddenly returning to the Emerald Isle to take up residence in Belfast, just because some Northern Irish Catholic predicted independence from the cruel British the following year.

But moving back to the ancestral homeland was complicated by more than the little logistical problem of transporting what were, in effect, stolen trucks and tractors across new international frontiers. With only half the move made, Hussein and his non-clan were confronted with the reality of war between the sub-Russian, quasi-independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and that thing called the Kremlin in Moscow.

Suddenly, the return to The Place of Deer from the town of Little Hope was complicated by the concept of *The Cause*.

"We went from town to town where we knew we lived," said Hussein, using the plural pronoun for himself, his immediate kin, and the collective Chechen diaspora without distinction or, maybe, contradiction. What he meant was that he used his contacts across the width and breadth of Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet states of Central Asia to raise an army of indignant volunteers. What he found was that most exiled Chechens, while patriots of The Cause, were far more willing to send their money than their children.

"Our volunteer detachment of fighters ended up consisting of six men—Shirvani, Xamid, my brother Ussam, and my other brother Musa's son, Sultan," he concluded bitterly. "That was it." Seylah and Ali apparently joined later.

How they managed to make the three thousand-kilometer journey from Little Hope to Samashki with a load of hidden weapons and ammunition was a mystery that required an explanation that Hussein would not directly give, or that I never quite understood.

"Contacts," he breathed. "We have contacts and debts everywhere. At police check-points, dams, bridges, borders—and even nuclear facilities."

We walked, we talked, both of us tacitly avoiding the subject that everything else revolved around until almost the last minute of the last night.

Finally, without even really broaching the subject, we sat down at his kitchen table, put the camera on its tripod, and checked levels and framing and lighting. Hussein then asked Fatma to leave the room, and I pushed on the record button.

We talked about war, about life, about death. We talked about this and that and the other thing, and we both knew that this was all wasted tape, designed to get both interviewer and interviewee in the same space before the real question was asked: What really happened on that awful night of April 7, 1995.

Hussein addressed the question of collaboration first. He dismissed it as disinformation spread by cowards who wanted to capitulate, meaning the Samashki elders, who had forced him to abandon the people he had vowed to defend.

Then he began to recall details of that long night, when he and his men, camped in the nearby forest, had been forced to watch—or rather listen—as Samashki was attacked by the double-crossing Russians.

"From the forest, we could see the town; and as the bombs began to fall, we heard another sound. Music. Music! *And cranked up to the highest volume . . . "*

And precisely at that moment, the bare bulb dangling from the ceiling flickered and then waned into darkness, as Hussein's generator began to stumble and die. Someone had forgotten to fill the tank with diesel. And there I was filming. That is what I had come there to do. To capture *this moment.* I could not ask the same question twice. I had come too far for a technical glitch out of my control to destroy everything.

You have a millisecond to find a way out of this, because darkness will envelope you in about a nanosecond.

The camera, positioned on a tripod on the table at which Hussein and I sat, records the moment. Hussein's voice quality improves, as the ambient drone of the distant generator drops. Then there is a quick falter in the yellowish light above us, and both Hussein and I sort of bend our eyes upward. While Hussein continues to talk, obsessed, I reach for a match and light it. A candle is somehow at hand, and I

light the wick. Then I place it first on one side of the table, think better about light distortion and shadows, and shove it to the other side of the frame. All this takes place in a seamless three seconds, and the frame dims, but never goes completely dark.

From a technical point of view, all this was disaster writ large. I was sure that the moment had been irredeemably destroyed. But in the BBC studio back in London, producer Keith Bowers taught me a term that I have cherished forever: *strength from weakness*. He took the stolen moment and turned it into brilliance, simply by adding context to the narrative. *"Under failing lights he told me. . . ."*

And this is what Hussein said:

"From the forest we could see the town burning, and as the bombs fell we heard another sound. Music. Music! *And cranked up to the highest volume. And to that music, Thomas, they killed a village.* A village. *They were not killing people, Thomas, but a village. That was the first time I saw a village killed."*

Samashki killed to music. Hussein had not seen Coppola's famous beach-bombing scene in *Apocalypse Now*, but someone in the Russian command had. Samashki had been blitzed to symphonic music—only, not Wagner, but Shostakovich.

"Which symphony?" I asked.

"The Third," replied the former *Komsomol* youth leader, former collective farm boss, and ethnic Chechen from a town called Little Hope in Kazakhstan.

Our last night together was spent at Musa's house—Hussein's second brother, whose kidney problems had dictated that his son Sultan would serve in the volunteer Little Hope brigade instead of him. Sultan, the doe-eyed youth who had become a killer at age sixteen along the railroad tracks outside Samashki, hovered around his elders for a spell before removing himself from adult company to listen to disco music with my driver. It seems they had more in common than with us.

When the kids left, the adult talk started in earnest, only occasionally broken up by the arrival of the standard Chechen boiled-beef

chow, served by the nameless daughters of the house. They were beautiful. I was never introduced.

The evening progressed, and I recorded hours of material of everyone present, as they plotted and planned their return to Chechnya and Samashki.

"We are going back, and we will leave our mark," said Hussein, looking directly into my camera, detailing several sabotage plans he had in store against targets en route through southern Russia. "This is just a little pause, Thomas, a *peririvka,* and we are using it for our own preparations. The war is not over. Perhaps it has just begun."

Great quotes.

But aside from abstract confession, why was Hussein telling me this self-incriminating stuff? The man who knew Shostakovich's symphonies must also know that the generals, colonels, and majors of the Russian FSB/KGB and their local Kazakh equivalents monitored the BBC as part of their basic database, or at least had their secretaries do so.

"Self-exiled Chechen fighters from Kazakhstan, meanwhile, suggest that their cause is far from over. Communist-era collective farm boss Hussein and his team of hardened volunteer fighters from the town of Samashki say they are ready to blow up nuclear power facilities to avenge Russian brutality used against their town, and do the same to other Chechens who happen to disagree with their take on how the war should end . . ."

Did Hussein want me to report that? And if not, why was he telling me such things, and on camera? It wasn't like he was some sort of noble savage who did not know better, or could not imagine the consequences of his words or actions—but then again, what about me? Was I such a noble vessel of neutrally-recorded truth? Did the medium have nothing to do with the message? Did the observer not affect the observed?

It had been so much simpler when it was merely a David-versus-Goliath story of the plucky Chechens taking on the Russian Bear. Now it was about bitterness, bravado, and betrayal, about different eras in different lives, my own included.

That last day in Little Hope dawned sun-on-snow crisp, bright, and clear.

Dazzling, actually.

I spent the morning with Hussein's wife, trying to get a read on what she thought of her husband's dangerous life.

"I knew my man would come home," she said.

Home.

What home, which home, which country was she talking about? Little Hope, on the northeastern fringe of newly independent Kazakhstan, recognized by the world as a legitimate state almost by default, or The Place of Deer, on the north slope of the desperate-to-be-independent Chechen Republic of Ichkeria, the blighted landscape unrecognized by anyone, save for the almost unrecognized-by-anyone Emirate of Afghanistan, soon to be obliterated by the American Central Command?

Vladimir, my driver, was opening the trunk and sticking in the hind quarter of the calf slaughtered by Sultan in my honor, and I was packing my camera kit and bags into the backseat, numb with emotional exhaustion.

Next would come the twelve- or eighteen-hour drive down the gouged track back to Alma Ata, followed by another six-hour-delayed flight back to Moscow, and then another five-hour air-hop to London to somehow thread the disparate and scattered pieces of this story into some workable and broadcast-worthy whole, before taking yet another twenty-hour journey back to deepest, darkest Livingston, Montana. There, good friends at the Owl Bar will order me a drink and ask *where have you been* and *how are you doing*, and I will smile and say something like *great* and be completely unable to say one real word, because I am so fucking far on the other side of the planet, the other side of life, that I cannot begin to explain where my head is really at, not even today.

Yet, ever the media mercenary, I realized I didn't have a necessary shot. I had nothing close to anything resembling a shot that could serve as the opener or closer for this segment, *this film*, of what I guess I

have to call "my journey to my friend Hussein," or something like that. This is the sort of clip that is a very difficult product to acquire if you are a one-man camera band like me, and requires not so much advance planning as the ability to think on your media-mercenary feet. So, in the middle of tossing my bags in the backseat of my transport, I sort of tossed my camera at Hussein's son Ruslan with one hand, while reaching out toward his father with the other for a good-bye embrace.

The kid is a natural, and instinctively understands what I want, capturing the last moments of my reunion with Hussein for me.

"Adik yurl," I say.

"Adik dali," Hussein replies.

Then he extends his other arm around me for a full bear embrace.

19 EXPERT PURVEYOR OF PAIN

Little Hope, Alma Ata, Moscow, London.

The editor assigned to the task of molding my material into something resembling BBC documentary style throws up his hands and calls in the boss.

"He doesn't have a script, there is no preplanned story!"

"This is an experiment," says Keith Bowers. "Just try and work with him."

Edit your heart away; eat your heart away, and listen to the Rolling Stones sing "Paint It Black" from their *Aftermath* album. We're in London, after all.

I see a red door and I want it painted black
No colors anymore, I want them to turn black . . .

Then, during the first part of week number two, for a job that is supposed to only take three or four days, the expert editor stops moaning and groaning and *gets it.* Yes, this piece of television was not shot according to a pre-agreed script. This piece of television is going to lurch around the globe and into the caverns of the darkened soul. And, suddenly, the piece is cut and voiced and done and in the can and scheduled for release on Saturday night prime time in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, as well as everywhere else the BBC broadcasts its prime-time program, *Correspondent.*

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, *squirt . . .*
00:00–*Cue; natural sound: A yellow bus lurches around car; gunshot sounds.*

00:11–*Goltz voice-over*: Samashki. The word in Chechen means The Place of Deer. To me, it meant the horror of war.

00:15–*Cue; natural sound: Pix show fighting, running, chaos.*

00:18–*Goltz, voice-over*: I was there as the nondescript farm town was turned into the symbol of Russian brutality, as Moscow tried to reassert "constitutional order" through the barrels of guns.

00:24–*Cue; sound on tape, heavy breathing; pix show RED house sniper nest.*

00:31–*Goltz, voice-over*: The place is indelibly carved on memory. I was inside the ring of fire—and have never been so frightened in my life. I often wondered if I'd get out alive.

00:48–*Cue; natural sound; pix of chopper flying across screen, shoots tractor and cow; Blast!!*

Ten minutes and forty-eight seconds later everything, *everything* was in the ether—the school, the wedding party, Muhammad standing on a ladder saying he thought I was dead, Ussam declaring that he would never believe his brother could sell out his people, and, finally, Hussein in Kazakhstan, talking about how his idealized village had been killed to the music of Shostakovich. Years of my life and decades of my soul, and the most important subject in the world reduced to ten minutes and forty-eight seconds of TV time and then, *squirt*, and its over—in the ether, *gone*.

And then the announcer was thanking viewers for having tuned in, and to please tune in again next week for three more *Assignment* pieces: *Hope Springs Eternal In Mexico City Slums, Cowboy Poets in Montana*, and *A Throat Singer From Mongolia*.

"Thanks, good night, and stay tuned for the BBC Comedy Hour, *Live!*"

A guy could get suicidal about this sort of stuff, if a guy did not know that that is just the way it goes, even in the best television biz.

Squirt, gone. Vapor.

Return to Samashki (I preferred to call the piece *Aftermath*) was nominated for the Rory Peck Prize in its third year. The judges, however, felt the world had moved on from interest in the chaos and confusion that was Chechnya, or maybe that the market was saturated with war-related news. The winner that year was a secretly shot piece called "Bringing Home the Bacon," wherein the videographer rigged himself up with a miniature camera hidden in his glasses to film life and death on a pig farm and slaughterhouse in Scotland.

Meanwhile, I was commissioned by my new fans at the BBC to do another "I remember an obscure war" piece on the siege and fall of the Georgian Black Sea city of Sukhumi, where I had first befriended a certain Lawrence Sheets. Coupled with the publication of my book on Azerbaijan, I was turning into something of a perceived expert on war and ethnic strife in the post-Soviet lands. ABC's *Nightline* roped me in as a consultant for a story they were doing on Caspian crude oil. This was followed by an appearance on CBS's *60 Minutes* with correspondent Bob Simon, and then an hour-long broadcast on C-SPAN of the Samashki and Abkhazia pieces, with attendant discussion.

Somewhere around that time I got looped into managing a feel-good program funded by some feel-good international agency that brought together two Ingush and two Ossetian television reporters to shoot and edit a mutually acceptable documentary on their obscure conflict. The exercise was staged to "build mutual trust" between the mutually inimical North Caucasus communities, both of which bordered on Chechnya. I am not sure if we succeeded in that task or not, but the trip got me down to Nazran in Ingushetia, from where I was able to courier a copy of my *Aftermath* film to Hussein's father in Samashki. I do not know whether it ever arrived.

Back in the United States, universities and think tanks began lining

up to have me drop by. Announced lecture titles varied, but generally focused on the theme *ethnic conflict in the Caucasus and the Chechen crisis*. I spoke to local committees on foreign relations in Birmingham, Boise, Casper, Dallas, Detroit, Houston, Indianapolis, Little Rock, Rochester, Salt Lake City, Tampa, and Wichita, Kansas. University appearances included everywhere from Columbia, Georgetown, Harvard, Northwestern, Princeton, and Tufts, to Berkeley, University of Chicago, University of Kentucky, University of Massachusetts, University of Minnesota, University of Washington, and University of Wisconsin. Other showings included featured positions in the annual Middle East Studies Association convention in Chicago, the annual Human Rights Film Festival in New York and the Mountain Film Festival in Telluride, Colorado. I was asked to participate on a panel of war correspondents, entitled *Dateline Hell*, at New York University's journalism school on my way to cover Kosovo, and I accepted two separate appearances at the Air Force Special Forces Training School at Hurlburt Field outside Pensacola, Florida, where pilots and soldiers were taking a crash course on guerilla warfare, although it was probably labeled something like "Terrorism in the Caucasus."

"This is where the rubber meets the road," whistled Cap'n Pfaff at the SpecOps school. "Can you come back next year?"

The scariest gig was a very special appearance at Barnes & Noble Books, arranged by a high school friend named Gayle whom I had not seen in over twenty years, and attended by other graduates of the Class of '72 along with diverse other family and friends, and the weirdest was an appearance at the Central Intelligence Agency, also arranged at the insistence of an old friend. Once inside the old headquarters building, I took advantage of the occasion to study the Killed In Action commemorative plaques decorating the entrance to look for that commemorating my old friend and superspy, Freddie Woodruff, killed under a cloud of mystery in Georgia in 1993. It wasn't there, although I was later told that this was because Freddy was still officially working undercover, even though he had been dead for years. Then I smoked a cigarette in the outside courtyard, where Aldrich Ames used to cadge information from nicotine-addicted secretaries. I had the impression

that many in the spooky audience were almost jealous. I was leading (or had at least in part led) the life they had joined The Agency to lead, but they had only ended up sitting behind computer screens, endlessly analyzing.

The centerpiece of all presentations at the CIA and all other venues was the *Return To Samashki* video, shown after a preliminary lecture about the ethnic structure of the USSR and the wars I had covered almost by accident. Almost always, the reaction was grateful, or at least gracious, and the question-and-answer period animated.

The exception to what seemed to be near universal acclaim came from an audience member at a presentation at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. I include a summation here because, despite her being factually wrong about various aspects of my presentation to the point of fantasy, there is no question that she did hit the mark on certain larger issues. Through the use of the Samashki film, I had *indeed* become used to shocking people by my own experience with violence. The criticism, published in the school newspaper, was entitled: *Goltz Sells Terror—Are Students Buying?* It said:

> *While listening to a reading given last week by Thomas Goltz . . . I happened to wonder why interesting people, or people labeled as such, are so often full of themselves.*
>
> *. . . Goltz managed to squeeze in a couple of references to Azerbaijan and two ten-minute videos on conflicts, but half of the videos focused on him talking about the war and carrying logs, for some unknown reason. Still, Thomas Goltz explained the war as a totally different ballgame than what might have been expected. . . . He made members of the audience, myself included, think of being in the middle of the war in Chechnya and wondering if escape is at all possible . . .*
>
> *"Well done, Mr. Goltz, how great. Please, please give us more information about what really happened," the audience should have said. Neither in the videos, nor during the speech, did Goltz give the names of any wounded or killed soldiers. There were no precise battle scenes. At one stage, though, we*

learned that Thomas Goltz had managed to escape from a town under attack with the help of his friend, who was later labeled a traitor for reasons unknown. That information would have been enough, too. But it was never given. How could we possibly learn about the war in Chechnya, when the only information Goltz provided concerned himself? What about his friend who was excluded from the village for being a traitor?

Maybe what information the audience wanted was something Thomas Goltz was not prepared to divulge. . . . Certainly, they do not need to be patronized by a war correspondent and his tantamount experiences in order to learn more about Chechnya.

One student who attended the conference disagreed with that. "This guy has escaped such a great number of dangers, and that is a feat in itself. He has reasons to be proud of himself; simply coming back alive justifies his egocentrism."

Thomas Goltz's flight. That statement summarized the whole conference. How to go to war and come back without haunting memories . . . but it seemed that Thomas Goltz had never really managed to flee from Chechnya. He was now entirely part of that war. In his eyes, being a living testimony made him living evidence. Therefore, other facts besides his presence were not required. Unfortunately for the audience, that was not only not true but regrettable.

Ouch.

There was too much true there to avoid looking long and hard at the facts.

I *had* become some sort of academic shock-jock. I *was* using myself as a delivery vessel of national pain and confusion in Chechnya and the Caucasus.

It was my style, *damn it!*

Maybe it was time to start looking into something else, like life, instead of death.

I went back to Montana and began to mountain-bike. I tried to be

nice to my estranged wife. I planted ten fruit trees on the occasion of my father's eightieth year on this earth, wishing him more. I refused to write a word on Chechnya and tried not to think about it. It was time to heal.

Then came the summer of 1999, and there was no staying away any more.

"Where are you, man?" howled Uncle Lawrence Sheets down a long-distance line from Moscow, or Grozny, or some place in between. *"This is it!"*

"It" was the renewal of war. The reasons remain obscure, and the list of established facts were radically different, depending on whom one chose to trust; but a central essence remained: The unloved and unstable Chechen Republic of Ichkeria found itself involved in a foreign adventure that was generally described as an Islamic invasion of southern Russia.

This much was clear. In July of 1999, a group of fighters under the command of Shamil Basayev and Khattab sallied forth into the neighboring Russian subrepublic of Dagestan. The Chechen version of events was that the Basayev-Khattab mission was to assist several fundamentalist, Islam-inclined villages that were under siege by the Russian military. The Moscow version of the growing conflict was that the Wahhabite fundamentalist fringe in Chechnya meant to expand the scope and influence of their forces by raising the banner of *jihad* across the entire Muslim North Caucasus.

Cynical observers came up with darker variations on these scenarios. The most basic was that the Russian political establishment, newly under the control of KGB Colonel Vladimir Putin, and still chafing under the humiliation of the Khazavyurt Accords, was looking for blood. To draw it, Kremlin planners had managed to lure Basayev and his Muslim commandos into a trap that had been specifically set to reignite war by recasting the Chechens as unwelcome invaders, and stripping them of the familiar emotional fig leaf of their being outgunned victims.

If this was indeed the dark plan hatched by then KGB boss Putin, it succeeded masterfully. The kindest nuance on this grim piece of

chess playing was that Shamil Basayev rose to the Dagestani bait, not through a lack of understanding of Putin's deep strategy and aims, but as a diversionary, preventative action that would buy the government of Aslan Maskhadov invaluable time to stockpile munitions in deep mountain bases before the *real* anticipated Russian assault began on Chechnya itself, and a blitz against Grozny that would reduce the shattered city to even smaller chunks of rubble than before. But first, the Russian public had to be primed—and that preparation took the form of midnight mass murder in Moscow.

In early September, earthquake-creating assassins detonated packed explosives in the basements of three working-class high-rises on the outskirts of the Russian capital. The slab-concrete walls and ceilings and floors came crashing down like a disrupted house of cards on the people sleeping inside, killing hundreds.

Chechen terrorists! screamed the Moscow media, demanding revenge.

The few dissenting voices who argued that the anonymous bombing was not the Chechen style were further encouraged to question the official take on the gruesome killings when a fourth apartment bombing was not only foiled, but seemed to suggest the perpetrators were not Chechens, but the dark Russian secret services. By chance, a sleepless resident of another working-class apartment building on the outskirts of the central Russian city of Ryazan noted two or three strangers placing sacks of sugar in the basement of the apartment building, and then slipping away in a suspicious manner. Concerned, the night owl called the local police, who rushed to the scene and evacuated the building while a bomb squad removed the timers and sacks of explosives, disguised as bags of sugar. But then the story took an odd and ominous twist. The authorities in Moscow sent in a different set of agents to remove the explosive sacks to the capital for further chemical analysis—and then announced that the entire event had been no more than an elaborate hoax, or testing of people's "vigilance," and that the apprehended bags of explosives were indeed only sacks of sugar.

For the residents of the building who had been left in the cold and

damp streets all night, many old and infirm, the idea that they were merely part of a vigilance test raised more questions than it answered, starting with the most basic. If their police had indeed made a positive analysis of the contents of the sacks as explosives, why had the men from Moscow carted the stuff away, only to declare it to be sugar?

And when people such as the "oligarch" and part-owner of the ORT television channel, Boris Berezovsky, and my friends over at the *Itogi* program at the independent NTV station started to look into the Ryazan incident a little too closely, they were soon silenced, or brought to heel for doubting the official line.

"We will crush the bastards in their toilets!" vowed street-talking Vladimir Putin, now elevated from KGB boss to that of Russia's new emergency premier.

Further nuance was lost in the fury of renewed Russian hatred of all things associated with the murderous Chechens, as a wave of patriotism verging on racist frenzy gripped the Russian Federation.

I watched the war evolve from the sideline perspectives of Montana, Istanbul, Baku, and Tbilisi, wanting no part. But friends and colleagues kept asking a deeply troubling question: Other correspondents had taken up the insanely risky business of getting to Grozny to file reports by cell phone about the Russian blitz from the perspective of cellars, so why didn't I?

I made my contacts through the person of the mysterious Mansour Jachimczyk, he of the Liz Taylor Orphan Concert in Istanbul, who had relocated with Khoj Akhmet Noukhayev and the Bebek-based Chechen Foreign Ministry on the Bosphorus to the fourth floor of a best-left-nameless hotel in central Baku.

Both Noukhayev and Jachimczyk were sitting out this round of war on the curious rationale that Aslan Maskhadov's vision of Chechnya was that of a territorial state, which the visionary Khoj Akhmet regarded as the root of the problem that had directly resulted in the current war. Specifically, Mansour explained, the new political concept he and his boss were promoting was based on the revolutionary con-

cept of "devolution" of all existing, statelike entities into much smaller, clan-based authorities, where traditional ideas such as blood vendetta administered by local elders would hold sway.

What this meant, of course, was that Khoj Akhmet and Mansour were now theoretically against defending the Chechen state and its government. This was a leap of logic so staggering that I almost had to laugh.

"Mansour," I cut him off. "Enough of your models. What I need are contacts to smuggle me over the mountains into and out of Chechnya without me getting killed." Mansour reflected for a moment and then took out a pen and paper.

"These are your people in Georgia, and those are the people on the other side of the frontier," said Mansour, handing me the names and numbers. "Go with God."

It was early October 1999, and a good time to have old friends, no matter how strange.

20 COLD FEET AND A BURNING BRAIN

I waited for them at the confluence of the rivers, a point on maps called Shatili, the place where a pass through the towering Caucasus Mountains of northern Georgia became a pass through the towering Caucasus Mountains of southern Chechnya.

It was October 10, 1999. I remember it clearly because I was planning on making the cross into Chechnya that night to spend my forty-fifth birthday in Samashki the next day.

Georgia was the only country in the world, except for Russia, with which Chechnya shared a common frontier. Only fifty miles long, it was marked by vertigo-inspiring nine-thousand-foot passes cut beneath peaks of more than twelve thousand feet. Wildly beautiful and remote, it had now become a funnel for exhausted city people seeking haven and respite, and others, like myself, attempting to make the so-called "toboggan-run" down the Argun River into Chechnya at war.

On the Georgian side of the border, miserable knots of newly arrived and completely dispossessed people made pathetic fires out of washed-up roots and twigs, and other dry-fall to stay warm against the mountain chill. On the other side, a mile or two to the north, a dirty white plume of smoke rose like an evil cumulus cloud, marking a new explosion that had been inaudible due to distance, the acoustics of the valley, or just the river roar.

I had arrived from Tbilisi with two other correspondents who were making a rugged weekend trip of depositing me on the frontier. There, I was to link up with a man named Tom Dibb, the regional director of the land mine–removing charity organization, Halo Trust, who was

making an illegal crossing into Chechnya that night in order to extract his staff.

There was, in fact, no border to cross. The mountain road to Shatili sort of ground to a gutted end at the white-water confluence of the Argun River and a minor tributary. A Georgian Army outpost had been set up on a bluff above the rivers to intercept volunteer Wahhabite fighters from the Middle East, who were said to be sneaking in to Chechnya from Georgia in order to join the fray in Grozny. At least that is what the Russian media had been reporting, thus necessitating some Georgian security response. Ironically, the only individual answering the description of the much-feared fundamentalists was a dual national Jordanian-American who had fled Grozny with his pregnant Bosnian wife and three-year-old daughter, only to end up an enforced guest of the Georgian compound. He apparently thought we were American consular officials because several were said to be on their way up to Shatili to interview him. He threw himself on our mercy.

"I was working for a Saudi relief agency in Sarajevo, but came to Grozny to develop a business involving honey products," babbled the man, named Omar Al-Kurdi. He sported the thick beard and neatly trimmed mustache (and camera-aversion) usually associated with Wahhabites, but could not be described as fierce or threatening in any way. "The Russians bombed my house, and the Ingush would not let me enter their country," he related. "Then bandits took my car, so we decided to make our escape. Please help! I am an American citizen, and a graduate of Fresno University's faculty of linguistics!"

A Kurdish Arab from Jordan with American citizenship and Saudi charity connections involved in the honey industry in Chechnya, trying to make his way back to Bosnia? It ranked right up there with the mysterious Mansour's ability to rope in Liz Taylor for a one thousand dollar-a-plate benefit dinner in Istanbul. Surreal.

"They collect all night near the frontier, and start across the river in the morning," said Colonel Irakli Kopadze, commander of the post, referring to the refugees trickling across the frontier. He bore a remarkable resemblance to the actor Lee Marvin. "There is nothing we can do for them, apart from register those with passports. Aside

from wild mountain sheep, even the villagers up here have no food to speak of."

Most of the people stumbling across the river were actually citizens of Georgia, local Chechens known as Kists. Due to the whim of Soviet mapmakers, they had found themselves living on the northern slopes of the Caucasus range, but in Georgia, rather than Chechnya. During Soviet times, the delineation of the frontier hadn't made much difference. Shepherds and sheep just shifted back and forth across the invisible frontier as they pleased. But following the breakup of the USSR in 1991, many of the Kists had felt the pull of ethnic nationalism and decided to relocate to Chechnya proper. Given the logistical difficulties involved, most arrived in Chechnya via the circuitous but much easier route of traveling to Grozny by road via Dagestan, or North Ossetia, the two Russian subrepublics that bracketed Chechnya. The reverse migration of both Kists and their Chechen refugee cousins, however, was happening under the most trying conditions imaginable: Up the Argun Valley from Grozny to Shatoi, via a road now being blitzed by Russian artillery and aviation, and from there still farther up an even worse mountain road to the logging community of Itumkale, and then finally across the twisting goat-and-cow path carved into the ridges above the upper Argun River toward the Georgian frontier post. And, once in Georgia, their reception was hardly warm. The total regional population of the Shatili region was less than five hundred souls, most of whom belonged to a clan of tough mountain Georgians known as the Khevsurs. Some maintained that the blue-eyed Khevsurs were really descendants of a group of crusaders who got lost in the area in the Middle Ages; others that the Khevsurs were the purest form of Georgians, as they had never been overrun by the succession of conquering armies that had swept through the funnel of land known as Georgia, throughout its long and bloody history. Whatever the case, the Khevsurs were deeply ambivalent about their Muslim Chechen neighbors, and had been for centuries, as witnessed by the shale and stone guard towers and fortress villages that marked the white-water gorges and alpine meadows of the rugged terrain.

"As North Caucasians, our hearts go out to the refugees arriving

from the war," remarked Shamil, our botanist driver and guide, who was originally from what was once a mixed Khevsur-Chechen mountain village. "But they are Chechens, and are all involved in weapons and drug smuggling and stealing cattle and even people."

It almost defied logic how anyone, no matter how motivated by greed or ideology, could possibly move quantities of contraband or human beings up or down the twisting gravel paths that passed for roads in the region. The one-hundred-mile route from Tbilisi to Shatili, up and over the *Datvis Djvarigeli* (Bear Crest) Pass had taken us more than five hours in a four-wheel-drive vehicle during the day, and was far too dangerous to traverse at night. The smallest driver error on the dirt-and-shale road could result in pitching your vehicle off a vertical cliff into an abyss. Georgian security checkpoints on the southern face of the range should have easily intercepted any and all undesirable traffic, not to speak of the small garrison under Colonel Irakli's command on the frontier itself. And it was precisely that traffic, moving from Georgia into Chechnya, that I was depending on to bring me back into Chechnya at war.

We waited and waited. Then, at dusk, I heard the sound of distant motors, and then saw two sets of headlights, making their way down the hairpin turns above Shatili, coming from the south. Soon, two white landcruisers pulled up to the security bar. It was Tom Dibb and another Brit from the Halo Trust, traveling with an escort of four or five Chechen toughs—my ticket out, meaning my transport back to war.

But it did not look good. The weighted pole barrier gate called a *schlagbaum* remained in place, and the Georgian guards stood their ground, refusing to let the Chechen convoy pass. As night fell the Chechens escort became increasingly vocal and pushy, evoking eternal friendship with the Georgian guards and making unspecified threats by turns. It was, I have to say, one of those rare moments when one really saw a portrait of the Chechens, as found in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago,* when the noted Soviet dissident describes the Chechen as the only people in the work camps who could not be broken by the system because they showed no fear. Now, there they

were. Six men with a couple of pistols, stuck in a cul-de-sac, staring down a garrison of unfriendly soldiers, and making the garrison start to blink. Sadly for me, the soldiers did not blink soon enough.

"I think it is because the Georgian commander knows you are media," said Tom. "Act like you are leaving, and then double back. We will cross at first light."

After a truly miserable night spent in a filthy, wood-smoke-filled cabin, I was back at the post early the next morning. But the vehicles were already gone.

"They went back to Tbilisi," said the Lee Marvin look-alike, Colonel Irakli.

But, on the far side of the *schlagbaum* there were fresh car tracks leading down over very rough ground to the rock-strewn, boiling white stream bed. Did they emerge on the other side, and then disappear into Chechnya? It was almost impossible to tell.

Well, not quite. In the wake of the September 11 attacks and war with Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, the *New York Times* ran the following front-page article on December 9, 2001, by reporter Michael Wines, entitled "War on Terror Casts Chechen Conflict in a New Light."

> *Urus-Martan, Russia—The only road from Georgia into Chechnya worms northward from the Russian border, across the Caucasus Mountains and through Russia's wild Argun River gorge. On a drizzly October day two years ago, Abdul Itslayev was standing beside it, hitchhiking.*
>
> *It was the start of the Russian Army's assault on rebels in Chechnya, and Mr. Itslayev had come to Itumkale, a village wedged between seven thousand five-hundred-foot peaks, to move relatives out of guerrilla territory that was certain to be a battle zone.*
>
> *He succeeded, but in unexpected fashion. For instead of the usual sputtering Lada automobile, there appeared on that hopelessly remote dirt path two brawny Mitsubishi four-wheel-drive vehicles driven not by Chechens but by foreigners.*
>
> *"In my car there were two Brits and an Arab," Mr. Itslayev*

said in a recent interview. "I asked them why they came here. They said they were coming to help the Chechens."

In fact, the three were coming to join a group of militant Muslims that had established a paramilitary beachhead inside Chechnya. As in Afghanistan, some were outsiders and members of the strict Wahhabi branch of Islam. Their trademarks, as in Afghanistan, were money, fancy sport utility vehicles and a taste for the best weaponry.

. . . Stories like [Itslayev's], Russian officials argue, bolster what the Kremlin has been saying all along: That its two-year-old war in Chechnya is a battle against international terrorism, not a brutal suppression of domestic separatists. It is also the sort of story that Americans and other Westerners shrugged off until the attacks of Sept. 11 forced a reassessment of the spread of terrorism . . . [etc., etc.].

I do not know about the "Arab," but I can state with almost total certainty that the two Brits referred to were Tom Dibb and his companion from the Halo Trust, a small fact lost in the fight to make the connecting link between Osama bin Laden and Chechnya.

The reporter for the Gray Lady may have missed the boat in December 2001, but I had certainly missed the bus that October day, two years before.

It was October 11, my forty-fifth birthday. I had planned to spend it in Samashki. That was not going to happen; and, due to the impossibility of getting there that same day, I could now question why I had attempted to do so in the first place.

Why Samashki?

To find my friend Hussein? Was he even there? Did it make any difference?

What effect would my presence have on him this time around, or on others?

Who was I to go to Chechnya at all?

How did I really intend to contribute, aside from maybe celebrating my own bravery, cloaked in a story about the well-known horrors of war?

When would my life go on without war?

There were several practical aspects about my planned hell-hole birthday soiree that were also problematic. For example, I had no specific assignment, much less a camera or cell phone or sack of cash—and this time, there was no Video News International to blame, only my own lack of organization.

Was I planning to just sort of hang around as a war voyeur?

Well, maybe. I could still try and sneak by the Georgian guards and make it across the river, and take the "toboggan ride" down the Argun, and maybe make it to Grozny that night; the alternative would be to stay in Shatoi or Itumkale, likely under interdictory attack, and then push on to Samashki the next day.

But I did none of those things and was in none of these places. I was back in Tbilisi in a restaurant, getting drunk with old and new friends, feeling rotten and cowardly.

I rationalized that the time had come for other madmen (and women, too) to make their mark in the exciting world of war reporting. Maybe I was now older and war-weary—and maybe wiser. But the argument felt hollow. Maybe I was just afraid.

The long road home led through Baku, Istanbul, London, New York, Salt Lake City, and, finally, my local airport outside Bozeman, Montana. I picked up my truck and drove east some twenty-five miles to the place many of us call Dodge, meaning Livingston.

Eight thousand people one hundred and fifty years ago and eight thousand people today.

Once again, I had been away for months.

"How was Chechnya?" everyone asked.

"Never got there," I replied.

"And that guy you made a film about, that Muslim fighter guy?"

They were asking about Hussein.

epilogue

STUMBLING TOWARD SAMASHKI

A Human Rights Watch research team in Ingushetia has interviewed five survivors of an October 27 Russian attack on Samashki village, located some eighteen miles west of Grozny. Witnesses said the village was repeatedly shelled, beginning on October 15. The heaviest assault appears to have occurred on October 27, when dozens of Samashki civilians were injured or killed. Human Rights Watch has no information regarding possible military targets in the village. The Russian attack struck homes inhabited by dozens of noncombatants.

Beginning late at night on Oct 26, Russian shells fell with increasing intensity on Samashki. "We had taken shelter in our neighbor's basement," recalled Malika Abdullaeva, a thirty-year-old schoolteacher. "There were about seventy people with us underground, including many children and babies." At eleven P.M. *on October 27, Abdullaeva took advantage of a lull in the shelling to leave the shelter and look for food together with her twenty-five-year-old sister, Satsita. As they returned to the basement, the house standing above the shelter suffered a direct hit. The two sisters, located some fifteen yards away, were thrown to the ground by the force of the blast. Malika was hit by shrapnel in her right thigh, while Satsita was wounded in her back and left leg. Because no bandages were available, their injuries were bound with torn cloths.*

Louiza Abaeva, a thirty-year-old Samashki resident, said that Russian shells "landed on the whole area of the village" on October 27. She said her shoulder wounds were caused by explosives launched from two Russian warplanes strafing the village at ten A.M. *The planes*

scored a direct hit on two nearby homes, killing two women and three children from the Abdukadirov family, and blowing off the leg of twelve-year-old Zelimkhan Yakuev. Forty-two-year-old Hava said that "95 percent" of Samashki's dwellings were aflame by the evening of October 27, and that many residents were killed or wounded that day.

Human Rights Watch is concerned that the attack on this village may have been conducted without appropriate precautions to avoid grossly disproportionate harm to civilians, and calls on Russia to respect the principle of civilian immunity.[24]

Hunting was rotten that fall in Montana.

Liquor flowed freely.

I howled at the moon.

My war went on without me.

It was no longer my war.

Old names, new events; new names, old events.

My war went on without me.

Maybe it was no longer my war.

Boris Yeltsin resigns the presidency of the Russian Federation on December 31, 1999.

KGB Colonel and interim Prime Minister Vladimir Putin becomes acting president, and then is formally elected to that office in March 2000, campaigning on a platform of restoring the "Dictatorship of the Law."

Putin declares Russian journalist Andrei Babinksi a traitor for his aggressive reporting on continued atrocities in general and the abominations conducted on young Chechen men in the "filtration" camps in particular.

Reporting on the (renewed) war is becoming women's work, literally. Russian reporter Anna Poltkovskaya and the French journalist

24 "Many Civilians Killed in Samashki Village, Chechnya," Human Rights Watch press release, November 4, 1999. Available on-line at http://www.hrw.org/press/1999/nov/checha1104.htm (accessed July 9, 2003).

Anne Nivat travel behind and over lines in the attire of traditional Chechen women, detailing horror after horror. Nivat even finds herself in the very operating room where Shamil Basayev is having a damaged foot amputated while on the run from the collapse of the Grozny front.

"What is the situation?" demands Basayev of the doctor, coming out of surgery conducted without anesthetics.

"We have removed your right foot due to the danger of gangrene," the doctor replies.

"Praise God!" sings Basayev. "I now have a leg in heaven!"

The surgeon, Dr. Hasan Baiyev, becomes an international symbol of medical bravery for applying the letter of the Hippocratic Oath to treat all wounded, whether alleged terrorists or Russian soldiers—and is accused of treason by both sides in the conflict.

The documentary *Dark Side of the World* is shot by the Czech journalists Petra Procházková and Jaromír Stetina in Grozny and Samashki. It wins the SAIS-Novartis Prize for Excellence in International Journalism.

The Georgian filmmaker Nino Kirtadze creates a haunting piece entitled *Il Etait Une Fois La Tchetchen,* which translates as "Chechen Lullaby." It takes the Adolf Grimme and One World Festival prizes.

Then Chechnya slides off the world stage again, save for the occasional report by Moscow-based correspondents on guided day tours to devastated Grozny. The dangers of attempting any other method of getting into Chechnya is summed up by the fate of Roddy Scott, an Englishman killed in September 2002 while on an illegal, cross-border assignment from Georgia into Chechnya, all too much like my original excursion to Samashki.

The seizure of Scott's camera is a coup for the Russians, as the taped material on the dead journalist proves without a doubt the accuracy of recurrent Russian claims that Chechen fighters are using the north Georgian area around Shatili, known as the Pankisti Gorge, as a base for cross-border operations, a charge long denied by the Georgian president, Eduard Shevardnadze. Shevardnadze, it seems, has even hired elements of the officially nonexistent Chechen fighters to travel to the

other side of the country and engage in sabotage missions against the separatist regime in the breakaway province of Abkhazia, in the vain hope of recapturing the city of Sukhumi, which the Abkhaz and Chechens and "rogue" Russian forces had captured in 1993.

Meanwhile, back in Tbilisi, acting ambassador Phillip Remler at the United States embassy declares that in addition to Chechen refugees and now fighters to be found in the Pankisti Gorge, the place has now possibly become home to Al Qaeda types fleeing the American campaign in Afghanistan. The United States sends in hundreds of military trainers to school the Georgians in the art of policing their own country. It is the first deployment of U.S. soldiers in the lands of the former Soviet Union.

The primary Al Qaeda connection to Chechnya is the Arab warlord Khattab. He is assassinated in March 2002 by the clever means of a poisoned letter. The Russian secret service takes credit for the killing, but persistent rumors have it that Khattab was set up for assassination by members of President Aslan Maskhadov's inner circle, who found the Al Qaeda connection embarrassing and Khattab's Wahhabite-based anti-Sufi campaign offensive. The man who allegedly sent the letter is murdered outside of Baku.

The Grand Mufti of Chechnya, Akhmad Kadyrov, who fought against the Russian forces in the first war, is appointed the leader of the Republic by Putin in an effort to drive a wedge between traditional Sufi Islam and the knots of Wahhabites, and Vladimir Putin calls for a referendum on Chechnya's status as an integral part of the Russian Federation, essentially declaring it to be legally part of Russia forever.

Speaking for the government-in-hiding of Aslan Maskhadov, one of my erstwhile Internet Chechen discussion group partners, Francis Boyd, declares the referendum null and void according to Article 21(3) of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Boyd's new title is Attorney of Record for the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria.

The referendum goes ahead anyway in March 2003, with the expected results. The vast majority of Chechens, the Kremlin vote counters declare, have voiced their approval of being an integral part of the Russian Federation. The Maskhadov government-in-hiding calls

fraud, noting that thousands of Chechens who have been dead for years have apparently voted yes from their graves.

The Baku-based Chechen journalist Mahirbek Tamarov teams up with Djohar Dudayev's widow, Alla Dudayeva, on a quixotic mission aimed at stripping Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn of his Nobel Prize for Literature. The man who once lauded the Chechens as being the only people who remained unbroken in the Gulag is now charged by those same unbroken people to have embraced a Great Russian cultural chauvinism that borders on racism.

Uncle Lawrence Sheets quits Reuters and spends a year studying fencing, astronomy, and Chinese at Stanford University, as part of a one-year special journalist scholarship that is designed to help overworked hacks chill out, then takes on the job of Moscow office bureau chief for National Public Radio just in time to cover the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of September 11.

He is at Mazari-Sharif at the time of the capture of the so-called American Taliban, John Walker Lindh.

"Why don't you come on down?" chides Uncle Larry. "There are kids down here straight out of journalism school making four hundred dollars a day as producers. It's a madhouse!"

I give Afghanistan a pass. I would give Iraq a pass, too.

Then came the spectacular October 2002 seizure of 750 hostages at the Moscow House of Culture by a squad of fifty Chechen suicide commandos, including fifteen women dressed in Islamic-style *chadors* who make their demands under the green banner of Islam and not the Chechen national flag. World opinion decides that the hostage takers probably deserved their executions at the hands of Russian commandos, who storm the theater after gassing everyone inside. Some 120 hostages also perish along with the hostage takers, who are individually shot in the head as they lie prone on the floor. The executors go so far as to place a bottle of cognac in the limp hand of the theater seizure action's leader, a twenty-five-year-old man named Movladi Barayev. He hailed from Alkhan Yurt, the village that had replaced Samashki as the symbol of wanton Russian brutality, after it was blitzed and massacred in December 1999.

On February 20, 2003, ABC News broadcasts a report citing the U.S. Customs Service, who had been tipped off by the Russian Security Service that two Chechen "terrorists" traveling on false Georgian passports "may be attempting" to illegally cross the frontier from Mexico into the United States and make their way up to Montana:

> *The alert warns that the pair may be followed by four more Chechens from Georgia's lawless frontier region of the Pankisi Gorge on the border with Chechnya.*
>
> *U.S. officials are concerned because elements of the Chechen resistance are aligned with Al Qaeda, and they believe the gorge has served as a haven for at least some Al Qaeda fighters fleeing Afghanistan.*
>
> *Whether this is the start of a trend, the Service says, is still unclear.*
>
> *It is also unclear what the two Chechens would do in Montana.*

Were Hussein or any of his men among the "terrorists"?
Had he become a terrorist?
Was Hussein a terrorist all along?
What *was* a terrorist?
Was he alive?
Did it matter anymore?
My war went on without me.
Maybe it had never been my war.

Then I got the phone call.

Actually, it was a garbled message on my parents' answering machine in Bozeman, the town over the mountain from my hideout in Livingston. The essence was that someone's neighbor in Moscow, who spoke some English, was delivering a message from someone else, whose name was unintelligible, and was leaving a telephone number

for me to call back. The problem was that the prefix was neither Moscow nor Russia.

I called it anyway, ringing through an international operator.

"Alma Ata, Kazakhstan, for you sir," the operator cheerily announced.

"Govorit Tomas Goltz," I said in Russian. "With whom am I speaking?"

"This is Musa," said the voice on the other end of the world, twelve time zones away. "Just a second and I will get him."

And then another disembodied voice was on the line. A voice that breathed exhaustion and remorse and a desperation so profound I have difficulty putting it into words.

Hussein.

"I must see you," he croaked into the receiver, voice distorted by thousands of electrical miles. "I do not trust anyone else in the world."

He had gone back to war again, but was now back in exile, seething.

I told him he could rely on me, that I would find my way once again to the town in distant Kazakhstan called Little Hope, his place of exile, his home.

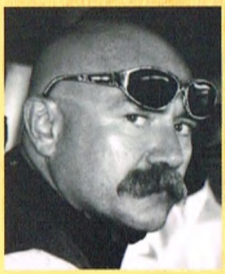
I have yet to keep the pledge, because I have been working on *our* book of war, as some sort of testament or at least reminder of human foibles and frailty but also devotion.

Myself, I never want to see war again.

As I look up from my desk, literally on the last page of correcting this manuscript before it goes to the publisher to be set in stone, I find two Spring-shaggy young bucks standing in my shrub garden, not twenty feet away, staring at me. Their audacity is so outrageous it makes me laugh for the first time in an ice age, and I only chase them away to save the bushes. Otherwise, they could stay all day, stay forever.

They are the Chechen visitors to Montana that ABC warned me to look out for, friends, symbols from my muddy little town on the north Chechen plain.

Samashki, the Place of Deer.



THOMAS GOLTZ is the author of *Azerbaijan Diary*. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and many other American and international newspapers and magazines. When not traveling the highways and byways of Turkey and the post-Soviet Caucasus, he lives in Livingston, Montana.

Jacket design by Olga Grlic

Jacket photograph © David Turnley / CORBIS

Author photograph by Jessica Lutz

www.stmartins.com

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

DISTRIBUTED IN CANADA BY H. B. FENN AND COMPANY, LTD.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Advance Praise for *Chechnya Diary*

"This rusty little razor blade of a book is a deeply disturbing and uniquely personal contribution to the study of the tragic subject of Chechnya at war, ethnic and national conflict in the post-Soviet Caucasus, as well as the workings of the modern American media. Goltz has done it again."

—Professor Frederick Starr,
chairman of the Central Asia and Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University

Praise for *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic*

"As sheer adventure, the account stands by itself as compelling reading, but the scholarly minded will benefit as Goltz moves from the poverty of post-independence Baku through the chaotic war involving Armenia. . . . Highly recommended." —*Library Journal*

"Every reporter dreams of writing a book about what it was like to be on the spot when history happened. Thomas Goltz has done just that. . . . [His] tale is a gritty, blow-by-blow view from ground level." —*The Wall Street Journal*

"[Goltz] has the ability to insert himself, and thus his readers, into a world of politics, intrigue, corruption, and war that makes for not only an interesting lesson in modern nation building, but also gripping theater."

—*Forbes Online*

"*Azerbaijan Diary* is said to be a cult hit among policy wonks, scholars, CIA operatives, and 'informational shock troops,' Goltz's term for the exclusive journalistic cadre of compulsive, danger-addicted voyeurs who court death to get the story. . . . [But] Goltz himself suggests that the nonspecialists ignore the funny names and approach his tale as a pure adventure from a faraway land. Take his advice and read this book." —*Brill's Content*

ISBN 0-312-26874-2

52795

9 780312 268749