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An Adventure



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The Journeys of Socrates

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Courtesy of HarperSanFrancisco Publishers

Dedication

Over the years, readers of *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* have asked me numerous questions about the service station sage I called "Socrates." Where did he come from? Did he ever marry or have children? Who were his teachers? What experiences shaped his life?

Now, decades after we first met, based on notes from his journals, I can finally relate the odyssey and experiences that forged the character and tempered the spirit of the peaceful warrior who became my mentor.

I dedicate this book to Socrates—and to you, my readers, who asked me to tell his story.

Prologue

Every journey has a secret destination
of which the traveler is unaware.

Martin Buber

I've killed Dmitri Zakolyev.

This thought played over and over in Sergei's mind as he lay belly down, straddling the moss-covered log, and paddling as fast and as silent as he could through the dark, frigid waters of Lake Krugloye, twenty-five kilometers north of Moscow. He was fleeing from the Nevskiy Military School and from his past—but he could not escape the fact of Zakolyev's death.

Following a course roughly parallel to the shoreline, Sergei peered through the darkness to the shallows and the wooded hills beyond, appearing and disappearing in the mist. The lake's black surface, lit by faint slivers of moonlight cutting through the clouds, shimmered with each stroke. The sloshing water and bitter cold distracted Sergei for a few more moments before he thought again of Zakolyev's body, lying in the mud.

Sergei could no longer feel his hands or legs—he had to make land before the waterlogged timber sank beneath him. Just a little farther, he thought—another kilometer before I head for shore. Escape by water was not the fastest or safest means, but it had one distinct advantage: Water left no tracks.

Finally he angled in toward the shore, slipped from the log, stood in the waist-high water, and waded through the sucking mud and sharp reeds at the water's edge, up the sandy shore, and into the dark forest.

He was fifteen years old, and a fugitive.

Sergei shivered not only from the cold, but from a sense of destiny, as if all the events of his life had brought him to that moment. As he threaded his way through the thicket of pine and birch, he thought about what his grandfather had told him, and how it all began . . .

* * * * *

That autumn of 1872, chill winds blew west across the moss-covered Siberian tundra, sweeping over the Ural Range and north across the taiga, vast forests of birch and pine, lichens and shrubs bordering the city of St. Petersburg, the crown jewel of Mother Russia.

Just outside the Winter Palace, wool-capped bodyguards of Aleksandr II marched along the Neva River, one of ninety waterways that flowed beneath eight hundred bridges, then past rows of small apartment buildings and church spires topped with the cross of Greek Orthodoxy. Not far from the river were city parks with statues of Peter the Great, and Catherine, and Pushkin—Tsar, Tsarina, and literary master—all standing sentry, bordered by street lamps just lit in the fading light of day.

Biting breezes snatched the last yellow leaves from thinning branches, tossed the woolen skirts of schoolgirls, and tousled the hair of two young boys, wrestling in the front yard of a two-story home near Nevskiy Prospekt. In the bedroom window on the second floor, a gust of wind ruffled the curtains where Natalia Ivanova, the wife of Sergei Ivanov, stood framed in the window. She pulled her shawl over her shoulders and smiled as she gazed down into the small yard where her little son, Sasha, was playing with his friend Anatoly.

Anatoly ran towards Sasha, attempting to tackle him. At the last instant, Sasha stepped aside and threw Anatoly over his hip, just the way his father had taught him. Proud of himself, Sasha crowed like a

rooster. Such a strong boy, she thought—like his father. Natalia admired his energy especially now, when she had so little of it herself—tired most of the time since her belly had swollen with their second child. Natalia's fatigue was no surprise—Yana Vaslakova, her neighbor, friend, and midwife, had warned her: "A woman of your fragile nature should not bear another child." So Natalia had prayed for the strength to carry her child to full term. She had been unable to do so until Sasha came and a new joy filled her days. But now the fatigue had moved into her bones and the fainting spells had begun.

Natalia shivered, wondering how little boys could play outside on a chill evening like this. She called out the window, "Sasha! Anatoly! Soon it will rain. You boys come in!" Her weary voice hardly carried over the wind. Besides, six-year-old ears heard only what they wished.

With a sigh, Natalia returned to the small couch where she'd been speaking with Yana, and sat with a sigh, brushing her long black hair. Sergei would be home soon. She wanted to look as pretty as she could.

Vaslakova said, "You rest, Natalia. I'll let himself out and shoo the boys inside. As her friend went downstairs, Natalia heard the patter of

rain on the sill, then something else, directly overhead—the scuttle of young feet and mischievous squeals. They've climbed the trellis again, she thought. In the mixture of anger and anxiety felt by all mothers of small boys who fancy themselves invulnerable, Natalia cried up to the rooftop, "You boys climb down from the roof this instant! And be careful!"

Laughter and more scuffling as the boys wrestled on the rooftop.

"

Come down now or I shall tell your father!"

"All right, Mamochka," Sasha called sweetly to curry her favor. "Just don't tell Father!" More giggles.

As Natalia turned back to lay her brush down, everything changed in a sudden, sickening lurch as young laughter turned to descending screams. Then silence.

Natalia ran to the window. To her horror, two bodies lay below.

Paralyzed, she stared down as Anatoly began to move and whimper.

Sasha remained twisted and still. Vaslakova, who had just exited, ran to the boys.

The next moment, it seemed, Natalia found herself outside, kneeling in the mud. She didn't feel the rain; she didn't feel her body. As she cradled her lifeless boy in her arms, the tears and rain running down her face, she rocked to and fro in the timeless rhythm of a mother's agony.

A knotlike pain in her womb ripped her back from the abyss—the incessant, demanding pain of loss. No, it was something else—she couldn't recall; she couldn't think. There was only the child in her arms.

Natalia was vaguely aware of Vaslakova and a man beside her. As Vaslakova helped Natalia to her feet, the man tried to lift the burden from her arms but Natalia fought him off. Just then she heard a boy's cry—she looked quickly down to her Sasha, but it was the other boy, Anatoly, whose leg was broken.

Vaslakova helped Natalia inside before the pain took her again. She doubled over and collapsed in the doorway. Where is Sasha? she wondered. He should come in. It is cold, so cold.

When her awareness returned, Natalia found herself in bed, attended to by the midwife. All at once she knew: The baby is coming . . . too soon . . . two months early. Or have the months already passed without my notice? she thought. Where am I? Where is Sergei? He will know if this is a dream. Sergei will smile and stroke my hair and tell me that Sasha is fine . . . that everything is all right.

Ah! The pain! Is something wrong? Where is my Sasha? Where is Sergei?

Sergei Ivanov arrived home to find neighbors in his front yard, standing in the rain. He saw their faces and rushed inside. Neighbor Vaslakova told him the news: Sasha was dead—a fall from the rooftop. Natalia had gone into labor . . . the bleeding wouldn't stop . . . nothing to be done. Both of them gone.

Their baby was alive. A son. But tiny and fragile—born so early he probably wouldn't survive. Vaslakova had seen much new life, and much death. Death is easy, she thought, but not on those left behind. A priest would soon arrive to perform last rites for Natalia and Sasha, and likely the infant as well. She placed Sergei's tiny son in his arms and told the distraught father that the child was too weak to suckle,

but a little goat's milk, squeezed from a cloth, might sustain the boy if he lived through the night.

Sergei looked down at the wizened, wrinkled little face, and the tiny body, swaddled tightly in a blanket Natalia had made. As grief overcame him, Sergei sat heavily and stared at the floor, seeing nothing. He barely heard Mrs. Vaslakova's words: "Natalia's last words before she faded away . . . she said she loved you with all her heart . . . and asked that you give her son into the care of her parents . . ."

Even dying, Natalia had thought about what was best for her child . . . and her husband. She knew that Sergei, a member of the *streltsy*, elite bodyguards to the Tsar, could not care for their tiny son.

Could she also have foreseen that every time he looked at his son, the child would remind him of this dark day? The priest arrived and baptized the infant in case he should die, for the sake of his soul. When he asked the infant's name, the distracted father replied, "Sergei," thinking that the priest had asked for his own name. So it was done—the child took the name of the father.

Midwife Vaslakova offered to care for the child through the night.

Sergei nodded slowly. "If he lives until morning . . . please deliver him to his grandparents." He told her the address and their names—Heschel and Esther Rabinowitz. Jews. This did not sit well with him, but they would love the child and raise him safely. So he did as Natalia had asked. Sergei could never refuse her anything in life or in death. That day in autumn marked the beginning of Sergei Ivanov's descent into death, even as his tiny son was clinging to life.

PART ONE: The Bitter and the Sweet

I have a sad story to tell, and a happy one.
In the end, you may find that they are one and the same,
for the bitter and the sweet each have their seasons,
alternating like day and night, even now,
as I pass through the twilight hours . . .
From Socrates' journal

1

Sergei was worried, that October day, when he was summoned to his uncle's office.

He was not supposed to think of Vladimir Ivanov as his uncle, but as Chief Instructor Ivanov. Nor was he supposed to ask personal questions, though he had many—about his parents and about his past. The chief instructor had told Sergei almost nothing about either one, except on that day four years ago to announce that his father had died.

Being summoned—a rare event for any young cadet—usually meant bad news or punishment. So, in no hurry to stand before the chief instructor's stern face and downturned brows, Sergei wandered across the school compound at a distinctly unmilitary pace.

Each spot Sergei passed in the inner courtyard held memories of earlier years and experience: the first time he'd ridden a horse, bouncing wildly, clinging to the reins in a death grip and trying to look brave . . . one of many fistfights he'd gotten into due to a quick temper.

He passed the infirmary and the small apartment of Galina, the elderly school nurse, who had watched over him when he first arrived. She wiped his nose when he was sick, and brought him to meals until he found his own way around. Too young to live in a barrack, he had slept

on a cot just off the infirmary wing until he was five. It was a lonely time, with no place of his own, and nowhere he fit in. The cadets treated him like a mascot or pet dog—petted one day, beaten the next. Until at five he was moved into the barrack with the seven-to-ten year olds.

Most of the other boys had mothers or fathers at home; Sergei had only his uncle, so he worked hard to please the chief instructor. His efforts, however, only earned the wrath of the older cadets, who called him "Uncle's Vlad's boy." They would trip, push, or punch him at every opportunity—a moment's inattention might mean bruises or worse. Older cadets routinely bullied the younger ones, and physical beatings were commonplace. The instructors knew about it but looked the other way unless someone was seriously injured. They tolerated the fights because it spurred the younger boys to toughen up and stay alert. It was, after all, a military school.

The first time Sergei was accosted by an older cadet, over in the corner of the compound, he started swinging wildly, sensing that if he backed down there would be no end to it. The older boy gave him a good beating, but Sergei managed to get in one or two good punches and the boy never bothered him after that. Another time he had come

upon two cadets beating a new boy. Sergei had attacked them with more rage than skill. But they backed off, treating the whole thing like a joke. But it was no joke to the new boy, whose name was Andrei, and who had been Sergei's only real friend ever since.

As the youngest boy in the school, he slept in a barrack with the seven- to ten-year-olds. Older boys lived upstairs, and anyone over sixteen lived in another building. The older boys ruled the barracks; every cadet dreaded a move to the next floor, where he would again be the youngest and therefore the prey. Meanwhile, Sergei and Andrei watched each other's backs.

Of the years prior to his arrival, he had only haze impressions—as if he had been cocooned in another world, not yet awakened into this one. But sometimes, when he searched his memory, he glimpsed fleeting images of large woman with arms as soft as bread dough, and a man with a halo of white hair. Sergei wondered who they were; he wondered about a great many things.

He had gazed at maps of Mother Russia and other countries on the classroom walls, and his finger had circled the globe on his teacher's desk, tracing lines across sky-blue seas and lands colored orange,

yellow, purple, and green. But he no more expected to visit such places than he thought to visit the moon or stars.

His world—until that day in October of 1880—was defined largely by the stone walls, the blockhouses, barracks, classrooms, and training grounds of the Nevskiy Military School. Sergei had not chosen this place, but he accepted it as children must, and passed his early years in orderly routines of class work, physical training, and discipline—military history and strategy and geography, riding and running and swimming and calisthenics.

Whenever the cadets weren't in their classrooms or on work assignments, they practiced fighting skills. In the summer, Sergei had to swim under the cold waters of Lake Krugloye while breathing through a hollow reed, and practice elementary skills with the saber, and shoot arrows with bows he could barely bend. When he was older he would shoot pistols and carbines.

It was not a bad life or a good life, but the only one he knew.

* * * * *

As Sergei drew closer to the main building, he tucked his dark blue shirt into his dark blue pants, and gazed down at his boots to see if

they were clean. For a moment he wondered whether he should have fetched his more formal dark coats or gloves, but decided against it. Most of the taller boys looked trim in their uniforms; on him everything still looked baggy. When he finally grew out of one size uniform, they gave him another hand-me-down.

Still daydreaming, Sergei shuffled down the long stone hallway toward his uncle's office. He thought about the last summons, four years ago. He could still remember his uncle's lean face and severe countenance as the chief instructor told him to sit. Sergei had climbed into a chair with his legs dangling—he could barely see over the top of the desk as his uncle had announced, "Your father has died." His name was Sergei Borisovich Ivanov. He was once an elite bodyguard to Tsar Aleksandr. He was good man, and a Cossack. You must study and train hard to become like him."

Sergei did not know what to feel, or how to respond, so he only nodded.

"Do you have any questions?" the chief instructor had asked.

"How . . . how did he die?"

Silence. Then a sigh. "Your father drank himself to death. A great waste." Then Sergei was dismissed. He remember how white his uncle's face had looked that day.

He had left the office awash with so many feelings it was hard to sort them out. He was sad to hear that his father had died. It also meant that his father had been alive, but had never come to see him. Yet he felt proud to know that he had a Cossack's blood coursing through him, and that he might someday grow strong like the father he never knew.

These memories flashed through Sergei's mind as he reached his uncle's office and paused outside the door. About to knock, he paused as he heard muffled voices inside. Curious, he listened.

"This visit you propose," said the voice of his uncle. "I will allow it. But several others disagree . . . they have no love for Jews, the killers of Christ."

"And I have no use for soldiers, the killers of Jews," said an older voice Sergei didn't recognize.

"Not all soldiers hate Jews," said his uncle.

"And you?" said the other voice.

"I hate only weakness."

"As I hate ignorance."

"I'm not so ignorant as to be tricked by your Jewish intellect," said the chief instructor.

"And I'm not so weak to be intimidated by your Cossack bravado," said the other man; then in a more friendly tone, he added, "You know, with your bravado and my intellect, we could have done great things . . ."

In the silence that followed, Sergei found the courage to tap three times on the door.

It opened to reveal his uncle and an old man. Sergei's uncle spoke curtly: "Cadet Ivanov. This is your grandfather."

The elderly man rose out of his chair and faced him. He had white hair and seemed happy to see Sergei. Then he spoke softly, almost in a whisper—it sounded like a name: *Sokrat* . . . Socrates.