**Romanovs Found : how when where why**

**In a hole**

We are digging a hole in a Russian forest when we see a man approaching through the trees. It is a birch forest, with dappled morning light falling on the trunks, the earth, and our pit and spade and the sports bag which hides our camera equipment. Still a way off, the man looks late middle aged, fairly thin, wrapped in a grey coat. We lower the spade and start to wander away from the pit, but a bit too late. He was heading for us, quite quickly, and we cannot get away from the site unless we run. He will see the hole, with or without us, so we stay. I pick up the spade again and slowly continue. It is better not to appear guilty, or as though we have something to hide. People dig in the forest for their own reasons. Yesterday, after the others told me they had seen a pack of wolves roam through the trees at Ganina Yama, at a comforting distance, I took time to walk a little away from our crew, into the woods on my own. I found a grave.

It looked fairly fresh. There was a simple wooden cross made from pale wooden thin slats of an industrial packing crate, and around it were remains of flowers. Tulips. A few wilted and bleached green stems, dagger-like leaves now floppy, and decaying petals, pink, perhaps red a day or two before. Our pit is almost grave-size, though we didn’t bring flowers.

The approaching man looks long-practised at giving an air of casual, slow nonchalance, while actually moving quickly for his purposes. Here in the forest, and from what I have seen of the Urals generally, those who have little or nothing are slow, unless they are young. Those with even a little are wary. Or well protected. Or both. I get the impression that in the forest this grey-coated man is usually good at concealing his purpose, but with us some of his urgency has slipped the mask. I think my dad is picking up on all this too, but perhaps not. Sometimes his trusting nature can dazzle his clear view. Neither of us speak Russian. The spade is light, and the handles break easily, but the edge is sharp and it would swing well if needed. With his foot, dad shuffles my jacket to cover up where a couple of chocolate bars and a trowel can be seen sticking out of one of the bags. I look around to see if anyone else is approaching us from other directions. A distraction would not surprise me. But it seems that no-one else is coming. It is not gang interest. He may be, as dad says, a mushroom picker.

We first heard the term “forest drinker” from Ludmilla in the British Embassy. An equivalent to the British or American “street drinker”, “forest drinkers” - a mixed group of men, women, and various ages - do so in what you might think of as expanses of presumably empty forest. In this part of Russia, where a lot of men live in their car if they can afford one, forests have domicile value, and provide food: mushrooms and berries. Footpaths as city streets, and the towering trees as homes and office buildings. A clearing is an intersection. One finds one’s own home. Forests have less witnesses than streets. We were advised to avoid contact with forest people. They are usually friendly, but tourists sometimes go missing, and it is hard to find them. She described the search for a young American man last year. It took a while to find him. It is easy to picture him sitting in a clearing with his new friends, smiling a bit nervously at first, then getting comfortable as the sun goes down. A fire. Glow of orange on beards, golden glints in warm eyes.

We have just dug a hole about the length, width and depth of a shallow grave. I could fit in it, with my legs bent up. My father is a bit larger. The earth is soft. The man who greets us would fit into it. He is about 50, maybe, greying, lean with only a very slight stoop, that could be age but his feet and shoulders are set a little wide like a boxer’s posture, with sharp eyes. About 3 metres away, he speaks and nods at the pit. A friendly tone, inquisitive, and I understand nothing of what he says. Dad replies in English, and we instantly establish that there is no common language. A grey wool coat. Neither black nor white.

He is a bit bearded, but not in the thin straggly way of a lot of mushroom pickers or other forest dwellers, or villagers from Koptyaki (well, the Koptyaki men, anyway). His beard is fairly neat, and his turned up collar fits well enough to protect his neck from draughts - though it is a warm day, particularly if you are digging.

The man says some more Russian words, and looks us up and down, looks over our equipment and at the bags and covers and waterproofs we have set down. He is very steady and lucid, not a street drinker. Dad again says that we speak no Russian but speak English. Dad tries some Russian which comes out as usual in the style of a pantomime impression of Peter Ustinov. Russians who know dad, and understand English, understand his Russian. I try nothing: I am the only one in our team who did not learn any Russian before we came out. I have picked up a few phrases but, regretfully, still do not know whether dos vidanya is hello or goodbye. At the moment I am not sure which I would rather say. “Hello” probably. I am learning the power of leading in introductions. My father has shown, on this trip, that hello works with a big smile. In fact, what really works for him is to be outrageously hospitable: air-kissing mafia bosses, and going over to a lady and her partner in a restaurant with a beaming grin and saying “Enjoy your meal. The duck is orgasmic!” Dad is less at ease here in the forest, remote from the city’s social norms and references which frame his greetings.

The man smiles, not necessarily with us, and approaches closer. Taps our bags with his boot, and nods into the grave. Chuckles, bobs his head in the way of inviting a response, which comes back from my father once again as we do not understand. He turns, exposing his back, and walks away. Slower than he approached, and more solid. Soon he is gone.

We both know what this means, and we’d better hurry. He came from the direction of Koptyaki. He is clearly from Koptyaki, but not just anyone. A senior man. I don’t expect that many in Koptyaki get to be 50 and have a trimmed beard.

I doubt that the folk of Koptyaki would be sympathetic to our quest. Yesterday we accidentally cut off their electricity. The boss has found the gringos who did it.

Usually when bodies are buried, the perpetrator digs the smallest hole possible, just deep enough to hide the body or remains, then makes the ground level so that attention is not drawn to the area by any immediate investigation. (*As in Yurovsky’s 1934 statement: ‘…piled in the bones, evened it over…’*) In normal circumstances, the body underneath decomposes so the earth above begins to settle down. Even if the hole is deep, the same situation occurs. The actual site of the burial becomes a noticeable depression as in time the earth sinks. There is sometimes an ‘inner’ depression above the actual body as the body itself ‘deflates’ from gas release and fat breakdown, and collapses inwards. This latter point would not probably apply in the case of burnt bodies, but does depend on the degree of ‘charring’ or ‘cremation’.

Another very important ‘tell tale’ sign is that after a while, weeds start to grow on the burial site. This is caused by the disturbed and mixed damp soil beneath the ground drying out by air exposure, and the soil above beginning to crack; the plants that grew there initially either die or are weakened and stunted. That was the exact situation in Koptyaki Forest and accords to the point that Gregoriy had made. What does surprise me though, is that nature’s supporting evidence still prevailed 86 years later!

* M. Buchanan-Smart, 2005

“We’d better hurry” dad says. Personally I tend not to speak much when everyone already knows the answer. “He’s not a mushroom picker. Look, he’s heading back to Koptyaki. We’d better go. Now.” I tell him we need to tidy our soil samples, as I scrape a little more earth from the side of the hole and bag our crumbly greys, greens and browns into clear ziplock bags. I look around and ask dad to do the same, “No-one else around, is there?”, putting him on alert in case he has become too distracted to remember we must stay vigilant, and hurrying bags and tools into our sports bags. No time to film, and nothing to take pictures of anyway: the soil strata are like those we saw yesterday – which in a way is frustrating, in another is reassuring. We walk off fast, down toward the exit and the gate, diagonally rather than heading back to the path first. I hold the spade. Up high. Blade uppermost. It’s tough to look tough with a Russian spade. Like digging, it takes a lot of effort and luck: they are made of birch, which snaps very easily, particularly when made as thin as they are here, and the blade is thin metal, usefully light, but rather soft and bendable. If you needed to swing it in earnest you might only get one swing. The handle would snap, unless you were very accurate with the corner of the semi-circular blade. I think of these things as we quick-march back along the path, holding a floppy sports bag with light jackets bundled over it, the dark of the forest at our backs. We feel a little uplifted by walking down a slope, which gives a feeling of high ground.

In the distance at the gate two young men stand in front of a white pickup truck.

The men are facing our direction. Perhaps not really watching us, but looking up the path, then at the trees. We can all take joy in leaves dancing in the sun. One holds a length of wood, perhaps an axe handle. He wears a t-shirt and fairly baggy trousers like docker pants. So does the other man, more kind of leaning on the back of the truck, taking in the breeze. There is nothing else here, nothing for them to be doing. Just the path into the forest and the old burial site of the 9.

“The mushroom picker must have called them,” dad murmurs. We’ve slowed to a stop, still in the trees, probably visible to them, but one never knows how light might scatter in a forest between trees. Maybe they haven’t seen us. It could sound unlikely that people based in a forest might co-ordinate by mobile phones, but they do. It is well known in Africa, and is common here as well. Where people want to build their dominion - to earn, protect and network - the cell phone, as a tool, is more primary than pens and cutlery. We both know the old man phoned back to Koptyaki and the guys drove round to block us off. I say “Not bad for a mushroom picker.” Humor seems to have left us. There is no way out. To the left is swamp. To the right is forest. We might be able to get to the road, but it’s a long way round, and it would only get us to where they could drive in about 30 seconds. In front is the only way out: the gate to the road. Behind is the long old road, now a footpath in the forest, to Koptyaki. It goes nowhere else.

This is the first time in my life I have no idea how to act. Until now God has shown me the way. Right now tho’ I cannot hear his instructions.’ (Entry in Alexandra’s Diary April 25th 1918 in Tobolsk)

Beyond the gate, up the road to the left, is Ilya, our taxi driver and escort for today, waiting for us in his white taxi. He’s a bit stumpy, not really in great shape, but a robust companion and, more importantly, connected to the mafia, albeit in minor ways. Our dinner at what turned out to be a mafia restaurant was Ilya having a joke on us, and showing the guys in the restaurant the kind of business visitors he taxis around. And probably catching up on mafia-support gossip.

One slight problem with Ilya is that he is always asleep.

“Call Ilya” I tell dad. Dad says “Oh yeh” and fumbles for his mobile. He is staring ahead, and hardly moving. I put the bag down, quietly, and hug him. “Come on. Call Ilya.”

As dad waits, phone to his ear, I look across to the forest to the gas pipe that runs up from in front of the swamp. It stands high on thin metal legs, a metre and a half off the ground. Oleg explained that this is done to avoid gas pipes being buried in winter snow, and fracturing. The snow often reaches 80cm deep. Is there a way we could get through down there behind the pipe? Through the swamp? We do not know how deep it is, or how far it goes, or where it goes, since in that direction the road curves away from the forest. We would be heading into a lot of swamp and not a lot of direction. At least they probably wouldn’t follow us. Russian dignity would generally prefer to lose its prey than get its wings dirty. But dad would be too slow. I have seen him run in mud races up estuaries, and that was when he was a lot younger. Pushing pension age, he simply cannot skip and hop over tussocks as once he might. The men would figure they could catch him easily enough to win on the dignity front. It occurs to me that I could escape. With one escaped, and able to get word out, the gang up the road might let him go.

“Ilya’s not answering.” We cannnot quite see his taxi from here. “How can anyone sleep so much?”

“Perhaps if we apologised about their electricity...”

I wish dad would laugh. I ask him to phone again. It’s the same thing. We both look in the direction of the taxi, hidden behind trees round the swamp and the bushes between the forest and road. I can picture Ilya now, flopped back in the driver’s seat of that stinky, cigarette-smoke-filled Volga Gaz3110, tongue lolled out a bit, peaceful for once, without the radio blaring German metal albums and radio stations celebrating – or doing pennance through - lost hits of the 80s. “What if God was one of us...?” I call Ilya on my cell phone. He doesn’t answer. And he was supposed to be on lookout! “C’monnnn Ilya...”.

We put our phones away. We know what we must do.

They are bigger than us, which kind of goes without saying in Russia. Not that everyone is bigger, but there are enough of them that nobody needs to send small guys to do their business. They are younger, and probably fitter too. My dad is in no shape to fight. It would just be me, and I would have to be very quick and accurate with the spade. They look chunky enough to have had worse than a spade in the face before. It probably wouldn’t even annoy them much.

I was supposed to be looking after him. My crazy old dad. I can still visualise the pit. Very clearly indeed – perhaps that is an effect of fear. Soft loam, and thin pale roots poking through the sides from the birch and fir trees. Us standing beside it, or kneeling over. A group of men around us. Would I give them the satisfaction of digging the second hole? I don’t know. The situation is new to me. New ground. A place to sleep, so far from home, beneath the trees, so far from where I consider “me” lives. Family and friends. Lost in a forest. I have dug my own grave.

Now I know a bit of what dad meant by wanting to bring the children home. Two children, left in a forest. Never mind that they have been dead for 87 years, they are still people lying in loam, alone, in the heat and the cold, the dark and the light, for years, for ever, until someone finds them.

We look at each other, then look ahead again.

We start walking down the path.

The men by the beaten up white pickup do not seem particularly interested. Again, part of that dignity thing, they do not need to hurry this up. No need to come toward us. This is a beautifully choreographed ballet. All moves are known, and follow the consecrated sequence as they must. If they approach us it just uses leg muscles they’d rather relax, and we might – if we’re really dumb – run away, not having realised our situation sooner. Best avoid any messy and tiresome running about. Death is an honorable affair. We are, all four of us, in this act together. By keeping their place they are maintaining dignity. More importantly, they are showing us the importance of dignity.

Dad and I reach the cross. It is the memorial to the 9: 5 Romanovs and 4 of their servants who were publicly found in 1991. 9 dark railway sleepers lie in parallel under a black cross, with the crosspiece at an angle as is usual for the Russian Orthodox church. We stand before it as if paying respects. We look around it, for one more time. At the back of the cross is the brass plaque which dad added last year: “The Children. Good Night. God Bless” There is a great depth to Russian dignity and pride. And sanctity.

“Light a candle.” I whisper to dad.

“What?” his voice is weak, and he looks to be in a stupor.

“A candle! Light a candle.”

“Why?”

“Just do it!”

He gets a candle from his bag, and sets it down.

“So they can see,” I interrupt, and dad shuffles round so that his body is not obscuring their line of vision to our ritual.

He lights it. I am not watching them. We mustn’t, or the spell will break. We bow our heads.

There is a rumbling in the distance. A train is approaching along the tracks, on the line near the road. It is such a heavy sound, as you could imagine a rockfall of boulders the size of houses down a mountain, heard from a place of echoes. I sneak a look out the corner of my eye, and lift my head slightly. The train is a tall, dark grey iron behemoth, long pillar chimney like an arm raised in revolution, with a huge fist, and fronted below by a vast triangle grid of cowcatcher, ploughing above the rails. It reminds me of locomotives in westerns about pioneering the free country, but with the black oily sheen of apocalypse. Oil’s silvery darkness is partly reflective, partly absorbing, like trees and earth. Behind it roll low wagons carring tanks and army trucks. The railway line is a way aways from the road, particularly on this side where the road edge dips down and the parking lane next to it descends to the forest’s entrance and the low swamp. Where the guys are waiting they can surely only see the tops of the tanks. The whole day we were here yesterday, nothing rumbled by. I didn’t even know that train track was in use – and we have spent quite some time looking at rusted rail tracks round here. Without raising my head I watch the men step back, up the roadside, and across the road, where they stand facing the train, to watch the tanks and the glory of war and industry and history roll by.

I run.

Down the path, past the gate, still wielding the spade just in case I need to whack someone to make it to the road, and swinging the bag in case throwing a camcorder would make a helpful distraction - realising that their being so near the railway line means there is no chance they will hear my pounding feet on gravel - up the side of the track and along the road to where Ilya slumbers behind the wheel of his treasured, wonderful taxi.

I bang on the window and he wakes and smiles. The sun is shining, it’s a beautiful day.

We are free.

Dad follows along behind. We drive away, back towards Ekaterinburg, and the guys get in their pickup truck and head off the other way.

“Where do you wanna go next?” says Ilya.

INDEX OF PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

THE ROMANOV IMPERIAL FAMILY

(*All executed July 17th 1918*)

1: NICHOLAS II: Last Emperor of Russia.

2: ALEXANDRA FEODOROVNA: Last Empress of Russia.

3: ALEXEI NIKOLAIEVICH: Tsarevich; heir to the throne.

4: OLGA NIKOLAIEVNA: Grand Duchess; first daughter.

5: TATIANA NIKOLAIEVNA: Grand Duchess; second daughter.

6: MARIE NIKOLAIEVNA: Grand Duchess; third daughter.

7: ANASTASIA NIKOLAIEVNA: Grand Duchess; fourth daughter.

THEIR DOCTOR AND SERVITORS

(*Executed with the Imperial Family*)

1: BOTKIN, Doctor Eugene; Family physician.

2: DEMIDOVA, Anna: Favourite maid of Alexandra.

3: HARITONOV, Ivan: Chef for the Imperial family.

4: TRUPP, Alexis: Manservant / attendant to Nicholas.

EXECUTIONERS & REVOLUTIONARIES

1: YUROVSKY, Yakov: Leader of the Execution; Commandant

of Ipatiav House – ‘The House of Special Purpose’.

2: YERMAKOV, Peter: Cruel executioner; Cheka Commissar.

3: SUKHORUKOV, Gregoriy: Cheka; involved with the burial.

4: RODZINSKY, Isai: Cheka; involved with the execution.

5: MEDVEDEV, Pavel: Head guard; member of the execution.

5: BYKOV, Pavel: Wrote the only Bolshevik account of the

execution and indicated ‘real’ disposal of bodies.

6: GOLOSHCHOKIN, Fillip: Military then District Commissar

for the Ural Region Soviet.

THE INVESTIGATORS

1: SOKOLOV, Nicholas: White Russian Army investigator.

2: WILTON, Robert: Time newspaper correspondent.

THE FIRST FINDERS

1: AVDONIN, Alexander: Doctor of Geology and Mineralogy.

(*Project Leader; field research*)

2: KOGUROV, Mikhail: Geologist and tracker; friend of

Avdonin. (*tracker and field research*)

3: RYABOV, Gely: Mystery writer and film maker; formerly

of the Soviet Ministry of the Interior. (*Communist*

*archival research*)

INDEX OF PRINCIPAL CHRONOLOGY

1894 Nov 1 Nicholas II Proclaimed Tzar then marries

Alexandra of Germany.

1895 Nov 15 Grand Duchess Olga born.

1897 June 10 Grand Duchess Tatiana born.

1899 Jun 27 Grand Duchess Marie born.

1901 Jun 18 Grand Duchess Anastasia born.

1904 Aug 12 Tsarevich Alexei born.

1905 Oct 20 General Strike begins in Russia.

1905 Oct 26 First Soviet formed in St. Petersburg.

1914 Aug 1 Germany declares war on Russia.

1916 Dec 30 Rasputin murdered.

1917 Mar 16` Nicholas II abdicates. Imperial Family are

held prisoners at Tsarskoe Selo.

1917 Jun 16 First Russian Congress of Soviets.

1917 Jun 24 Imperial Family moved to Siberia: Tobolsk.

1917 Dec 5 Russian and German armistice.

1918 Apr 26 Nicholas, Alexandra & Marie moved to

Ekaterinburg

1918 May 22 The rest of Family arrive in Ekaterinburg.

1918 Jul 17 Imperial Family executed in Ipatiev House.

First burial in pit at Ganina Yama.

1918 Jul 18 Bodies removed for re-burial elsewhere.

1918 Jul 19 Piglets Meadow: mass grave for 9 corpses;

2 bodies burnt and buried separately.

1918 Jul 25 Soviets lose Ekaterinburg to Royalists.

1918 Jul/Aug First investigations into ‘execution’.

1919 Feb 20 Sokolov starts full investigation.

1919 Jul Soviets take Ekaterinburg. Sokolov flees.

1924 Sokolov book of investigation: Conclusions

incorrect re ‘*all*’ burnt at Ganina Yama.

Accepted by Russian Orthodox Church.

1926 Pavel Bykov book. Family buried in swamp!

1976 Avdonin and Ryabov start investigations.

1978 Avdonin team discover mass grave.

1979 Jun 1 Avdonin team excavate; 3 skulls removed.

1980 Jul 7 Skulls and items returned to grave.

1989 Apr 10 Ryabov announces ‘Imperial Grave’ known.

1991 Jul 11 Avdonin team full excavation; nine

bodies found; initial identification:

Alexei and Marie or Anastasia missing.

1992/3 DNA confirmed Imperial Family remains but

not accepted by Russian Orthodox Church.

2004 Jun 27 Buchanan-Smart finds two children’s grave.

2005 Jun 18 Buchanan-Smart team excavates. Right fibula.

2005 Michael releases location of the site to the Russian authorities.

2006 Jun Michael presents the bone and location evidence to authorities in Ekaterinburg.

2007 Jun Excavation of the site by a team overseen by A. Avdonin.

2008 Apr 30 DNA confirmation announced; Alexei and either Anastasia or Marie.

An Empire ended in 1918 when Nicholas Romanov was executed, with his family, primarily by Bolshevik and Soviet revolutionary forces. The imperial family was shot in a cellar. Then disposed of in a mineshaft, then in a forest. The bodies were hidden to avoid the family being treated as martyrs. Most were found in 1979, and exhumed and publicly revealed in 1991. Two were missing. Anastasia or Marie, and the heir to the throne, Alexei. At least, it has generally been considered that Anastasia was not among the discovered dead, partly because her writings, and what was publicly known about her, seemed to show her as a more thoughtful and sympathetic child than her sisters and brother. The romanticism was pursued by girls and women who later pretended to be the surviving Anastasia. It is at least as likely that the missing girl was, or is, her sister Marie. Alexei had haemophilia, a condition which prevents or reduces blood clotting. There have been theories of his survival and escape after being shot and bayoneted, and beaten with rifles. There have been a lot of theories and tales.

In 2007 the two missing Romanovs were unearthed. In 2004 Michael Gerald Charles Buchanan-Smart worked out where the two children were buried. He realised and demonstrated how the many searchers over the years had misinterpreted a crucial aspect in the historic accounts of their hurried burial. He told the approximate location to the leader of the 1979 search and discovery team, and the reasoning behind it.

In 2005 we went to Russia and identified the site. In 2005 Michael told the location to Russian authorities.

Nothing happened, so he returned in July 2007, met with more authorities, and returned home. The authorities realised that Michael simply wanted the missing children to be reunited with their family. He wanted Russians to do it. But if they did not, he would.

Tents were erected near the site two weeks later, in late July. Digging began, by a Russian team, in early August.

In 2008 it was publicly confirmed that the missing Romanovs had been found.

**This book**

Among the first things you may want to know is “what makes this book on the Romanovs different from any of the others.”

The answer is in several parts:

1) It explains how and why the two missing Romanovs were found. The clue which led to the discovery of their burial place.

2) The travelogue elements: personal accounts of exploration in Russia.

3) This is not a history book about the Romanovs’ lives. There are plenty of Romanov history books. Massie’s is good, as everyone knows. Klier’s superbly describes the immediate circumstances of their execution. Some of the literature romanticises their memory. If beauty is truth, and truth beauty, then Romanov books are like Russia: there is a lot of beautiful scenery, and intrigue can also be found along the road. Russia, in towns and more rurally, does not have bright paper and plastic litter, but there are many dumped piles of stones and twisted shards of rusting iron - rubbish which has never blown away. Sometimes, walking city pavements in Yekaterinburg, with grass verges dry and overgrown to the height of your ribs, the path is interrupted by concrete boulders the size of a truck, which make you wonder how they got there. Romanov books are mostly beautifully true, but can sometimes make you wonder how the big rubbish got there.

4) This book is an account of the person who worked out the answer, his convictions and motiovations and superstitions, where they arose from, and how they helped him. There are some coincidences which can be considered impressive or miraculous. Rather than wishing to be objective, it is a collection of personal accounts. Some people feel passionate about the Romanov family, others about the revolutionary cause. We can all have views and sympathies. Michael avoided strong political or social views. He liked everyone, indiscriminately (including the ‘all-accepting’ sense of “indiscriminately”), and believed in their value. That would include you. Everyone is invited to be or feel part of the story - no matter how odd some of the accounts here may seem

5) It is all true.

**TO RUSSIA WITH LOVE**

‘DONT FORGET ME’

**By**

**Michael Buchanan-Smart**

Two headed Eagle

Print here

“The world will never know what we did

with them.”

(*Commissar Voikov: Ekaterinburg: July 1918*)

To

‘The Children’

Hopefully to be re-united with their

Mother, Father and Sisters

- One Day.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

A Prayer

Send us, Lord, the patience

In this year of stormy, gloom-filled days,

To suffer popular oppression

And the tortures of our hangman.

Give us strength, oh Lord of Justice,

Our neighbour’s evil to forgive

And the Cross so heavy and bloody

With your humiliation to meet.

And in upheaval restless,

In days when enemies rob us,

To bear the shame and humiliation,

Christ our Saviour, help us.

Ruler of the world, God of the universe,

Bless us with prayer

And give our humble soul rest

In this unbearable, dreadful hour.

At the threshold of the grave

Breathe into the lips of Your slaves

Inhuman strength –

To pray meekly for our enemies.

(*A poem copied by Olga and kept in one of her books)*

*(There are many variants of this translated prayer*)

Extract from the 1920 statement by Yakov Yurovsky, leader of the execution :–

“… They began to load the corpses into the light carts, but wagons were needed. This was very inconvenient. They immediately began to clean pockets – it was necessary to threaten them with being shot and to post sentries here as well. Then it was discovered that Tatiana, Olga and Anastasia were dressed in some kind of special corsets. It was decided to strip the corpses bare, but not here, only at the burial. But it turned out no one knew where the mine was that had been selected for this purpose.

It was growing light. The Commandant sent men on horseback to find the place, but no one found anything. It turned out that nothing had been readied at all; there were no shovels and so on. The car had gotten stuck between two trees, so it was abandoned, and, after the corpses were covered with blankets, the carts were moved in single file. We drove about 11 miles from Ekaterinburg and stopped a mile from the village of Koptyaki; this was around 6 or 7 o’clock in the morning. In the forest, an abandoned prospector’s mine about eight feet deep was found. The mine had a couple of feet of water. The Commandant ordered the corpses undressed and a fire built so that everything could be burnt. Men on horseback were posted everywhere to drive away all passers by.

When one of the girls was being undressed, it was noticed that the bullets had torn the corset in places, and diamonds could be seen in the holes. The eyes of those all around began burning brightly.”

As you may know, the grave of the two Romanovs, Alexei and either Marie or Anastasia, was found some way up the track from the grave of the nine[[1]](#footnote-1). There are many places where they could have been buried, and where searchers’ theories had placed them. They were not found at the Four Brothers mines at Ganina Yama, or nearer the swampy area of Piglet’s Meadow, or much further up the track to Koptyaki and Ekaterinburg. They were not among the trees in the woods, or at a railway crossing. Put simply, they were only about fifty metres up the road from the grave of the nine. I say “road” because, although it now looks like an earth track through the woods, it used to be a genuine road. The woods are not particularly dense. At the time of the burial the track was a road in the genuine sense: it was a main route for the vehicles of the time: horses, wagons, and motor vehicles. Gaps between the birch and pine are wide enough still to fit vehicles if one felt so inclined. I will go into some detail about roads, and you may think, “This guy’s useless. He promises a book about finding the Romanovs, but gives us a load of opinions about the state of roads.” The condition of roads and attention to details has proved useful during our visit, but if you think such descriptions are as useful and interesting as a pothole then drive your eyes around it to the next section.

The forest road, which led us from the security of Ekaterinburg to what felt like the wilds of the old track to Koptyaki, was new. The tarmac was slick black and shiny as mirror shards on a bouncer’s shoes. But soft. It reminded me of Rice Krispie cakes which are stirred too syrupy, and don’t hold together, but fall off in small chunks and don’t crunch when you bite. The new road had too much oil in it. Not enough lime or aggregate. A bit like Russia: an embarrassment of crude riches. Chunks of the road had fallen off at the edge, unsurprisingly since it had not been lain in a dug-out trench filled with a solid foundation. The road looked very much like it had been poured from the back of a macadam truck, a guy leaning out the truck cab window looking back and steering with one hand (I picture him smoking), a black line through the forest – veer left a bit, weave right a bit, “that will do” - then rolled flat and left to its own devices. If you fell off the side it would indeed be that: a fall of about a foot onto the grass underneath. In places the edge which had crumbled away was about half the width of the road. We frequently had to stop to let cars pass the other way before driving round the dinosaur bites along the edges of the ‘let’s-call-it-a-road’ tarmac layer, successfully poured between two points on a map. Job done.

That old P.J. O’Rourke quote came to life: “Commies love concrete, but they don’t know how to make it. Concrete is a mixture of cement, gravel and straw? No? Gravel, water and wood pulp? Water, potatoes and lard?”[[2]](#footnote-2) And that crazy tower somewhere near the middle of Ekaterinburg, that you can only see from half a mile away because it’s so tall, but is just a spindle shell of dry concrete, not a speck of glass or wood or plaster, just reinforced crust-crete all the way up with square gaps where there were once intentions. You can see through it most of the way up, through vast gaping holes where some four-sided purpose was intended to be. Nobody will talk about it. They won’t even talk about why they won’t talk about it. Something had sure gone wrong – and it wasn’t lard in the recipe since the thing still stood proudly defiant in the sunshine. What was it? A municipal project that ran out of funds after soaking up two summers’ worth of hope and a couple of winters of regret? Even Oleg, our brilliant guide, wouldn’t answer when asked about it. He’d point at some nearby building and cheer-lead some words, then hit the gas pedal and think that nobody could hear him sigh.

The real stunners of the highway system were the big holes in the multi-lane roads just outside the core of Ekaterinburg. Really big. The holes that Ilya didn’t swerve around because every driver knows exactly where they are, and you can see them from all neighbouring intersections. These ‘potholes’ are about the size of a kitchen. You wouldn’t hit them. You would fall into them, and it would take a crane (or about four Russians with grippy shoes) to pull the car out. At least two we peered into from the taxi were easily big enough to fit a dining table and six chairs, and still have room for a waiter; and deep enough that if a dinner party did settle down for a feast you would only see their heads, and maybe the flowers in the vase, if someone had left the stems long.

Okay, so that last bit about concrete and dining rights wasn’t strictly necessary in explaining the location of the missing children, but it illustrates that different folk and different municipalities and nations and times have different approaches to the reasonableness of putting oneself in a situation where you can get stuck in a wood.

From the 1920 statement by Yakov Yurovsky, leader of the execution –

“To make his way back, the Commandant appropriated a pair of horses that happened to come along. Those who had by chance been detained were sent on. After setting out on horseback, together with another Chekist, to organise the whole matter, the Commandant fell from his horse and badly hurt himself. In case the plan with the mines didn’t work, it was decided to burn the corpses or to bury them in clay pits filled with water, after first disfiguring the corpses beyond recognition with sulphuric acid.

….

We wanted to burn Alexei and Alexandra, but by mistake the lady-in-waiting was burnt with Alexei instead. We then immediately buried the remains under the fire and lit the fire again, which completely covered up traces of the digging. Meanwhile, we dug a common grave for the rest. A pit around 6 feet deep and 8 feet square was ready by around 7 o’clock in the morning. We piled the corpses into the pit, poured sulphuric acid onto their faces and generally over their whole bodies to prevent them both from being recognised and from stinking as a result of decomposition. Having thrown dirt and brushwood on top, we put down railroad ties and drove over them a few times – no traces of the pit were left. The secret was completely safe; the Whites didn’t find this burial place.”

That track though the forest is still the main route for pedestrian traffic, and would make a handsome bridleway. It has not changed much from the photos from 1918 and the 1920s. There are more nettle patches.

....it took over 20 reads for me to get Yurovsky’s statement right!

Bestest Wishes

Michael

* M. Buchanan-Smart, from a blog post, 2006

**Rossiya**

Hotel Rossiya sounds like “Russia”, and it is. It is a huge hotel in Moscow. It is where Michael stayed in 2004, and where we stayed for the two nights in Moscow in 2005. Those of us who spent the first night detained in custody still did so in Hotel Rossiya, since it has metal cell blocks in its courtyard. They sit like vast shipping containers - which is probably what they are, with a couple of holes cut out for windows, or like a jar with holes in the lid for kids to catch bugs - among the other storage containers, boxes and palettes in the wide stretch of Rossiya’s walled-in scrubland, with pale patches of rubble, and clumps of small dark green elder trees and bushes of lilac, which clearly were not planted but grew there themselves; made their own existence to stand proud on tough ground, as Russians do. The space rarely has people. I saw only the occasional figure standing by the cells at night, outlined in the low yellow lightbulb glow from the front doors. Looking down from one of the inner-facing rooms, the vast courtyard is a slightly cluttered void, like staring back into the early universe at the first growth of galaxies. You get a similar feeling of distanced astonishment at what ‘Random’ can do with very basic raw materials. It would be peaceful if it wasn’t for the power generators which each rumble a solid and urgent version of what sound like Mussorgsky’s more mountainously pounding moments. As if underground in glowing red chambers a couple of thousand blacksmiths work, beating anvils, pouring iron into spluttering crucibles, hammering sword blades and horse irons and axes, in coal-lit sweat.

Hotel Rossiya is by Red Square. It could not be more central. It overlooks parts of the Kremlin, the colourful onion domes of St Basil’s Cathedral, the new boutique shopping centre “Gum”, the huge river Volga (the biggest river in Europe), and Lenin’s Mausoleum. Like Russia in so many ways, Rossiya was huge. About 2,900 rooms on about 19 floors[[3]](#footnote-3). Rectangular concrete, each of its sides took about two minutes to walk the length of (in shoes, or socks), and going somewhere felt like a journey. Simple to find your way around; lots of people but sparseley populated. The views are beautiful and awe inspiring. The light often seems an amber yellow. Colours you do not get in the UK any more. A kind of 1970s soft focus glow which made you feel comfortably mellow and relaxed, and a little bit dazed with the blurred syrup of the air around you. It also felt a bit like being in a zombie movie, which gave a nice sense of edginess. The front entrance is grand, but for inexplicable reasons you are not allowed in that way, and foreigners in particular can only enter through the side or back entrance, which still takes a little cajoling and producing the right piece of paper, though not necessarily the same piece of paper as was required last time, and is perhaps more about personal conduct and whim than formal paperwork. Entertainment had been thought about, probably at a committee meeting. There was a nightclub, a two-floor go-kart track that must have made business sense for someone, a fitness centre, a load of places to drink, and a couple of places to eat. If you are staying there the instinct is to get out for fun. Also at Rossiya, like the Russia of legend, it proved remarkably easy, even effortless, to get put in jail.

Everything about the Rossiya parallels what many of us heard Russia was like 50 years ago. When we stayed there it seemed to epitomise the old Russia - though I never visited Russia back then, and the similarity could be the other way round. Perhaps every journalist way back then, who was allowed into Russia, stayed at the Rossiya, and described Russia on the basis of the Rossiya. I think that conundrum is what I love most about it. And that it is

It was the biggest hotel in the world for 23 years.

Hotel Rossiya in Moscow has had its big bang. It closed down at the end of 2005. We knew this was on the cards when we were there. It’s Stalinian architecture was thought inappropriate for the site, and one can sympathise with that point of view. Rossiya was built on the foundations of what was to be the eighth of Moscow’s ‘Seven Sisters’, also known as ‘Stalinskie vysotki’, Stalinist skyscrapers, with the Stalin part often being left out. They are big. From a tall building, they stand out as conspicuously taller, but also wider, and more imposingly weighty than any other buildings in the vast city, which was no doubt Stalin’s intention. From a distance you can feel how massively thick the walls must be to hold themselves up.

The Rossiya closed its doors from 1st January 2006. Demolition began shortly afterwards. Which is a shame, from an outsider’s view who stayed there briefly. It was utterly magnificent, and nothing like it will be built again. Like old Russia. That can be said about a lot of things, though it will become less true as cultures blend into one familiar goo. I miss it, but I didn’t have to live there. I can see why Moscow wanted to pull down Hotel Rossiya. Everything about it was just like Russia in the old century, and a lot of that history is not a time and place where you would want to stay.

Its replacement is being overseen by that figurehead of modern legitimate businessman hierarchies, Baron Sir Lord Norman Foster. Which makes sense. They could have built it dacha style, but Russia is not a theme park. If you want to see big versions of the rural wooden cabin look, then visit Ganina Yama... and its four tiny holes in the ground that used to be mines, the ‘Four Brothers’. Earth scrapes that you can barely see even when you are standing right over them, leant on the wooden handrail, close enough to smell the offered orange and white lillies.

The Four Brothers are the antithesis of the Seven Sisters, though that could be said the other way round, since the Four Brothers are older. Structurally and politically they could not be more different. The Seven Sisters are man-made monoliths, immense, overground, deliberately using vast resources, which Stalin, who was allegedly of the people but at that time clearly not so, ordered for himself during his lifetime for his own aggrandisement. They take natural resources and make them fit human will of angles and geometry. At the time of construction they had relatively little in terms of purpose. The intended functions did not need such vast accommodation, and it was only later that they came to have more tangible civic and business functions: they began as hommages and gained practical use after they had been made.

The Four Brothers, on the other hand, were functional mines which fell into disuse. They were small. They are the absence of anything material: they are holes, the remnants of having taken resources, and a sign of no longer doing so. They were used to hide the royal family surreptitiously, chosen for their unnoticeable anonymity. The holes themselves are now even smaller. You tower over them as a general-public visitor, and can barely distinguish them from the earth around. Nature has slowly filled them in, and no-one even seems to have thought about stopping that natural process of returning to the earth. They have a piety, and very quietly, with a few lillies, acknowledge the religious humility of a more reluctant autocrat. Their recognition is about the end of an era, the end of the Tsar and his family and, to a far lesser extent, their imperial heritage. The mines have lost their simple practical function, and are now a cherished memorial.

The Seven Sisters not only have real uses to keep them going, but they would take massive effort to remove. Years of big machinery and disruption. If the Four Brothers were left alone, and not maintained, there would be no trace left within about a year. Rather than it being the legacy of a governed requirement to be an homogenous citizen in awe of power, what keeps the Four Brothers going at all is the sum of individual personal volitions to maintain a humble memory.

It will be interesting to see which lasts longer.

**Tripper**

Michael first went to Russia in 1998. In that year he visited 12th – 26th August as an interested tourist, having completed the script and music for a stage production of the story of the Romanovs, their execution, and the myth of Anastasia.

In 1998 it was not clear that the two missing Romanovs had been successfully executed with the other nine. Accounts have abounded of Anastasia and Alexei having survived. Of Anastasia having resurfaced in various countries, particularly in the land of the free, America: popular haven for Europeans seeking refuge from persecution, and for extra-terrestrials keen on abducting the cream of humankind. One can readily see the appeal of wishing escape and safety for Alexei and Anastasia. Believing that with childhood pluck they had escaped, borne the bullets and bayonets and jumped or tumbled from the death wagon, unobserved by the procession of armed men; a sallow injured pile in the forest, or a running, fleeting shadow of fear and hope. That one or both made their way through the trees, with bravery and God’s help, and found midnight sympathy in a humble homestead. Hot soup, poultices by candlelight, and safe carriage through Bolshevik webs to a secret point of departure from the lives which had not yet blossomed, and had been cut from them.

It is a beautiful tale of courage, and appealing not only because witness accounts consistently describe the burial separation of Alexei and one of the women from the nine other victims. Among the Imperial family, Anastasia and Alexei seemed intelligent and brave. Myths of their survival seem not only about escape from the executioners of 1918. It is also about escaping their family. There is silent appeal in the children escaping the fate of following their parents’ characters and acts, and becoming like them.

The loss of Nicholas and Alexandra was not widely lamented. There have been few tales of Nicholas’ survival which perhaps reflects not only that the Tsar himself was any rebellion’s main target, or that witness accounts are consistent about his decisive execution, but also that the world’s public and ruling classes probably thought that any courageous survival by Nicholas would be uncharacteristic of him, and unwanted.

It is a subconscious aspect of those hopes that Anastasia and Alexei escaped. Alexei’s life in particular was restricted by illness, and by his imperial parents’ dealing with that illness. Their fears for him.

You can call it amateur popular psychology, but it is pretty clear. Escape from their metaphorical cellar, stuck with the family. Escape from the one-way dark track; the rut they were stuck in along with their sisters, led there by their parents. Of the children they were the youngest, mentally still the most independent. For anyone with an inkling that some of the previous Tsars’ decisiveness remained in the lineage, or that the dynasty should remain, Alexei was a better future. And, should his illness take him away, there was Anastasia. There had been female rulers of the Russias. Some fine ones.

They were what the past could have been, and what the future could be.

On that 1998 visit Michael did not go to Ekaterinburg, but did visit Moscow and St Petersburg, where the remains of the family who had, by then, been freed of the soil, were interred in lined coffins at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul. Michael was removed from the Cathedral, or at any rate asked to leave the premises. It was an organised coach tour. Michael was also, at one point, asked leave the coach, again for not wearing his belt properly. He was standing up in the aisle of the coach, laughing and joking with his fellow passengers, when disaster struck: his trousers fell down. Again. They quite often took a tumble. Sometimes one could wonder whether they didn’t always fall. Sometimes I think they were pushed.

The 1998 visit further kindled his love of Russia: it’s history, people, and pride. The friendliness and strength of those he met. During the next three years, among his other work and projects, Michael researched the Romanov’s execution. He bought and read over 100 books on the subject, including some rareties prized among historians. The ability to afford to gather a specialist library is one of the joys of Michael having worked hard, made fun money, and not yet spent all of it on ladies, cigarettes, Jaguar automobiles, and his pantomimes on stage and earth.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

* M. Buchanan-Smart, 2005

I love Russia; I love its people; I love its culture; I love its history – and I love children!

I was born in Dorset on July 17th 1944, an only boy with three older sisters. When I was six, we moved to Essex and I was educated at King Edward VI Grammar School before pursuing a career in computer banking in London. In the late 1980’s, I became involved with Amateur Dramatics, undertaking all aspects including acting, producing, directing, and stage management; in farces, comedy, serious drama, musicals and pantomimes – my favourite. In 1995, I wrote my first new fairytale pantomime ‘Over The Moon’ and have now written 13 pantomimes. I have also written new fairytales as shows for children to act on stage, and adapted Aesop’s Fables for junior drama and schools. Many of my shows are now performed throughout parts of the ‘English Speaking’ world.

After writing the storyline ‘book’ of someone else’s musical, I decided to write my own. In 1999 I wrote *Anastasia;* the first act being historically based on the Grand Duchess Anastasia, and the second act on the ‘pretender’ Anna Anderson who went to live in America. This of course was not the truthful outcome.

However, it was after writing Anastasia with the help of music teacher David Harding who also assisted with the lyrics, that I became intrigued and absorbed in Russia and the Romanovs, leading to much research about the execution of Nicholas II and his family.

Research confirmed Michael’s solid belief that the two missing children were still in the forest, not far from the grave of the nine. Though long dead, the children remained alone, in a cold bed of earth, needing to be saved from the perpetuity of their fate. They had been burned, smashed with rifles, and left. His research suggested that they were not far from the original burial site.

Russia had changed a lot since Soviet Socialism had lost its hold, or at least since the country’s present day, and people’s prospects, had become so rapidly dissociated from the word ‘Communism’. The people and government were more concerned with opportunities than with the past. They understandably had things they wanted to do, which did not include finding missing members of an imperial dynasty more anachronistic than a glorious five year plan.

Michael believed that they could be found. It needed to be done. He would try.

He returned in 2004, from 16th June to 7th July, this time to see the relevant sites in Ekaterinburg. He wanted a hat to take with him. He had his reasons.

10th April 2004

Dear Office Boy

Customer Number: 0826110

Order Number: 20364702

RE: Foresters Hat

Many thanks for the total lack of communication and delivery service by your company.

WHERE IS MY HAT!!!

**Or is it your company policy to STEAL from Pensioners?**

Very Bestest Wishes

Yours sincerely

Michael Buchanan-Smart

cc The Board of Directors; Shires of Bath

The Managing Director; Shires of Bath

Customer Services Manager; Shires of Bath

The Tea Lady; Shires of Bath

Anyone; Shires of Bath

The hat was important to him, to cover the mark on his head.

1. I will refer to burial places of Nicholas Romanov, the erstwhile Tsar and Emperor, and his wife Alexandra the erstwhile Empress, three of their daughters and four of their attendants including Doctor Botkin, as the grave of “the nine”, being the burial place identified and opened by Alexander Avdonin and Gely Ryabov. The burial place which remained a mystery until 2004, of Alexei and Marie/Anastasia, children of Nicholas and Alexandra, is referred to as the grave of “the two”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. P.J. O’Rourke, “Holidays in Hell” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Those saying 21 floors are probably counting the 2 underground floors for the go-kart track. Yes, the go-kart track has two floors. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)