**Romanovs Found : how and why**

**In a hole**

We are digging a hole in a Russian forest when we see a man approching 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 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 loose 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 a ‘mass’ grave in

Piglets Meadow.

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; only nine

bodies found; initial identification; then

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 ‘2 Children’ grave.

2005 Jun 18 Buchanan-Smart ‘team’ excavates grave.

Right Fibula leg bone found by son Matthew

Incident! Excavation had to be abandoned

2005 Jun 19 ? Two Children to ‘Cathedral on the Blood’.

2005 Jun 20 ? Scientist identification confirmation.

2005 ?????? DNA confirmation; Alexei and ‘sister’.

* M. Buchanan-Smart, 2005

~~2005 ?????? DNA confirmation; Alexei and ‘sister’.~~

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.

**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*)