

FROM “AND AN ICON FOR KOZMALA”

by Nikolay Petkov

translated from the Bulgarian by Christopher Buxton

I have to admit that precisely for this reason I'm pleased about this interrogation in front of you. It reminds me of that one in '41. After that our relations with Esther changed. She realised that when your name is Esther and you live in Paris in '41 it's difficult for your innocence to be proven. The most difficult thing was to find someone who would believe in this proof. I don't know how it came about that they believed me in the Gestapo. And even now I can't get my head around it. Perhaps it's because nothing sounds more convincing than the actual truth. Surely it was because when I explained that we used pigeons to hide our link from everyone else, they did not doubt it. At the end of the day I was a monk in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and no one ought to have discovered that I was keeping in contact with a young and beautiful Jewess called Esther. It was as much, according to the viewpoint of our canonical laws, I explained heatedly, as if you were a Sturmbannführer in the Gestapo and your Granny was called Rebecca. “I understand” my interrogation officer¹ nodded to me sympathetically. Perhaps they were gratified by the strong Aryan spirit of our church laws or perhaps because the Germans were still our allies and it was indeed impossible for a Sturmbannführer's Granny to be called Rebecca. By now nothing could surprise me. When they discharged Esther, she thought, she'd felt, that our game of child-idiots had turned into one of life and death. She understood perfectly that to be Esther's friend meant putting a rope around your neck. Probably that was why she was shut up in herself. She said that she would travel to Suza² and Masada³, her lost cities. She assured me that until she had not begun to

¹ Allusion to Goebbels. As a student between 1917 and 1921, with the help of the Catholic society “Albert the Great” he graduated in philosophy at Bonn. Before that he had specialised in German history and literature in Köln, Freiburg, Munich and Heidelberg. His academic supervisors were Jewish, Friedrich Gundolf (a student of Stefan George, Gundolf wrote one of the serious essays on Goethe in 1916) and Fraiher Baldberg. Between 1927 and 1935, while he was editor of “Angriff” (Assault) he maintained intimate relations with the Jewess Else Yanke. On the 19th of December 1931 he married Magda Brandt with whom he had six children. His best men were Franz Ritter von El and Hitler himself. His wedding has always been an icon for Aryan marriage and Goebbels was minister for propaganda in Hitler's time.

² Suza is the Persian capital, where in the time of Xerxes or the time of Plato, by coincidence these two times are identical, Esther was married to Ahasuerus and as Persian queen saved her people from genocide.

³ Masada is a city fortress, built by Herod the Great at the oasis En-Ghali, there where once King David had hidden (Kings 24.1) where in 70 AD the 967 inhabitants had faced the 8000 strong army of the 10th legion of Lucius Flavius Silva. They took breath until the 11th legion arrived with another 8000 men. When after more than three years of siege Silva managed to break through the western wall of the city, Elazar ben Yair ordered the drawing of lots to pick ten men who would kill the remaining Jews. After that new lots were drawn who from the ten would kill the remaining nine. The last man killed himself in front of the Roman legionaries. Now Masada is a park, open on all days of the year (apart from Yom Kipur, the day on which Esther saved her people). Every evening after sunset, there is a light show, very similar with the one in Turnovo.

dream of them, she would not stop reading about them. She didn't go out anywhere. She even forgot about the pigeons. It was then that I returned to Bulgaria. I was scared not because of the Germans, but because I couldn't talk with Esther. Not even that. I was scared that she was more vulnerable than her pigeons and that I was incapable of helping her with anything. When I got back to Kostel I even started to search for the lost towns of my childhood. I set out on the road of my memories. They began a kilometre from the village of my birth, present day Gramatitsi⁴; back to that time when we would wander round for days at a time. Uncle would harness Marko. We put bread, sausage and tomatoes into the cart; tallow candles and a canvass tent which he'd inherited from the wars. He would say that with this luggage we could reach the end of the world. Later I realised where that is. I even reached it. We travelled through the forests and Uncle told me about Sheshkingrad and Turkesheni, about Konstantine and old Maryan. He took as far as Kraya, there where the regions of Elena, Sliven "Yailukioi"⁵ and Turnovo meet and pass each other by, where between the Old River and the Great Kamchiya, under the Great Sahar mountain you can find even now remains of the villages of Tsarevetsi, Manistiritsi, Malka Cherkovna, Glashatai. Kapishe and Bogomolsko, where I'd heard from my Grandfather, who'd got it from his Grandfather, that somewhere there, at the time of the Emperor John Tzimisces there had been a royal mint. On our return journey we always passed through the Mindiuviski canton, there where the river Vesselina turns towards Zlataritsa. Uncle showed me a bridge, finer than a cobweb. Only weasels and ferrets could cross it as it was more fragile than a pie crust, but once the Tsar's guards had marched over this bridge. After that it splashed through the river dried out by the heat and spread out over the grass so I could see among the roots glimpses of old walls. This was the site of medieval Bratovangrad. You would be its last visitor because if anyone heavier than 20 kilograms tried to cross the bridge, they'd fall. You however can cross, so one day you'll remember how you crossed time. I'll stop you falling, even if it breaks. Don't be scared; the river is shallow, he explained enthusiastically.

When I came back from Paris, there was not even a memory of most of these villages. I roamed for hours amongst towns that had long since disappeared and thought about Esther and Kozmala. I prayed for them to survive the war so we could meet again. Then the idea struck me – to make a present out of the lost towns. I set out on the old road from Elena

⁴ The name of this village is no mystery. It still exists and can be found 1-2 kilometres from Kostel in the Elena region.

⁵ The old name of Antonovo. After 1934 it was renamed Polyane and after the 9th of September in 1949 it took its present name from the Partisan Anton Krustev.

towards present day Antonovo. I reached the Old River, there where Uncle said Elena's Antarctic could be found. He called it this because for him it was the end of the world – even then no-one lived there. In the Manistiritzi area I found beams and stones from an old church. If the tales I had heard turned out to be true, it had to be from the time of John Tzimisces. I noticed that the wood was somehow preserved in a resin. They'd clearly employed methods of impregnation which have been forgotten in our times. In the walls I found some kind of vases sealed with wax. When I opened them, it turned out that they contained not gold, but only old rags. I was certain they had been old even then, sacred ritual robes, most probably chasubles, prepared for incineration. And of course forgotten. I believed that the icon from the Xth Century had made up its own mind, found me and begged me to carry it to Kozmala. I think that the very scene was born of itself or from that moment when Esther invites the Persian king Ahasuerus and the satrap Haman to the feast in the palace. I even saw painted those gold and silver vessels of wine which cost 300,000 talents. I knew also how the king would promise half his kingdom to Esther.⁶ The technical work was more than easy. The boards were exactly 64 millimetres thick and had the width of classic small format icons – 14 centimetres. I cut them in two with a bandsaw for thickness. The height was of no consequence. It could be arbitrary. In honour of my first Ephesus pilgrimage and of James Joyce, his funeral I realised had been exactly on that day on 15th of January, I decided to increase the width by 3.14, so as to achieve 44, the two fours or the famous eight lying on its side from Molly Bloom's monologue; or perhaps because this number reminded me of the four beat pattern of the sound "shin" in "The Song of Songs", and perhaps because of the ordering of the verbs "I affirm" and "I reject" in the four figures of the syllogism and its 64 moods; it was most probable, in fact almost certain that the two fours were a hint of the fact, that the memory of the pair of my twin-friends had turned into the measure of things. I repeat the height is of no significance whatever. I was simply looking for something symbolic, I imagined it as a numerical icon of balance and absurdity together. I made a linen canvass out of the chasubles prepared for incineration. I now think that they had waited 1000 years for exactly this. Obviously the guy who'd had to incinerate them, had felt pity. On the one hand – in spite of it being sacred - an absolutely unused garment which, whatever way you look at it, has no use. On the other hand – in spite of being old and unused, this chasuble has been a part of Holy liturgy, maybe stained with the bloody sweat of some repentant sinner, it would be a sin to burn it. But in that way it would be a sin not to burn it. Clearly the monk who had

⁶ See The Book of Esther 5.3 when the king touches Esther with his sceptre and asks "What do you want and what is it you pray for? I will give you up to half of my kingdom."

to solve this difficult task, had decided to put the chasuble in the vase in sand. He'd sealed it with red wax and had left it to bang its head against the succeeding centuries. I believe, and not just simply believe, but absolutely affirm it; I managed this task magnificently, I created a really skilful mystification, I achieved a magnificent primer from the Xth Century. From then on to the present day I've always said that nothing sounds more convincing than the truth. Just the paints remained. I had read Dionysius of Furna⁷ very carefully and knew a lot about their techniques. I worked them out myself. Only that instead of egg-white, which can be easily dated with radioactive hydrocarbon, I used fragrant oils from the Orient as the fixing emulsion. Where did I find them? When I went to Cairo for the first time, the strange system of price-setting made an impression on me. The smaller the quantity, the higher the price. In fact that's how it's always been through the whole world. Just that, in a simple bill, it turns out 100 kilograms cost the same as 10. I discovered that if I filled a barrel for rakia from rotting dates and oranges, which were thrown out in tons into the streets, I would be able to produce a distillation of rakia every week. And in spite of the fact that distillation was precisely an Arab invention, at this time it was something old, long ago forgotten. It was easier to find pomegranate or bergamot oil than the most common or garden bottle of plum rakia. And as is very well known, nature abhors a vacuum. I supplied myself with an unbelievable collection of ethereal oils – cypress, saffron, hyacinth, mustard, marigold...oils from parsley, sage and wild celery...I had musk, and ambergris, even oil from opium poppies. When I visited the Natural History Museum in Cairo I was deeply impressed by the wooden masks that had been untouched by time. Some of these were older than Moses. I realised that the boards of these masks had been soaked a long time in fragrant oils. That had drawn out the damp from the wood, impregnated it and so had achieved this "resinous" effect. I did not know this recipe. I experimented. I worked very slowly and very carefully, on two icons a year – one for Kozmala and one for Esther. And that's how it was for fifty years. This icon is my hundredth. And the first for which I was arrested. I hope it has worked out.

⁷ Mount Athos monk who between 1730 and 1733 collected much practical advice about how to create icons. His essays founded the Erminian genre.