

THE DEATH OF STALIN

by

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“Look at him,” Uncle Misha says in Yiddish, appearing in the doorway of our one-room apartment. “What a time for you to fall sick! Along with Stalin!”

March 4, 1953. I’m in bed. I didn’t protect my throat from the cold. I have difficulty swallowing. My fever is one hundred degrees—a good enough excuse for skipping school.

My uncle always teases me. Isn’t he joking now? Some joke!

This news of Stalin’s illness catches me off guard. In my consciousness, the words sick and Stalin don’t belong together. For me, he’s a bodiless being. If there’s no body, what can be ailing? Our leader has rarely appeared in public, speaking only on special occasions. (In my youth, I didn’t yet know that he tried to avoid newsreels. Apparently, he felt self-conscious about his Georgian accent, his short stature, and his pockmarked face.)

On July 3, 1941, two weeks after Germany had attacked us, Stalin appealed to the nation over the radio. Since I was only three years old then, I haven’t kept his voice in my memory. During wartime and a few years afterward, whenever I heard important government news read in the baritone voice of the Moscow radio announcer, it gave me the creeps. I was convinced that it was Stalin speaking. It didn’t matter on whose behalf that solemn and measured voice spoke—the Soviet Information Bureau, the Politburo, the government, the Central Committee of the Communist Party, or the Supreme Soviet. (I couldn’t figure out the hierarchy of all those organs for a long time. All of them seemed synonyms for the highest, unconditional power over our lives. These reports seemed to come from the ultimate authority, subject to no discussion.)

The rareness of Stalin’s public appearances has enhanced his mythology. He has been an unreal reality, like the heroes of Russian *byliny* and fairy tales—Ilya Muromets, Nightingale the Robber, or Kashchey the Immortal. Somehow Stalin has combined all three of them, evoking admiration, veneration, and trepidation at the same time. Now and then, Stalin’s face has flashed in newsreels, his smile frozen, his hand raised in greeting, when he has been honored with parades on Red Square. Because of his mustache, it has been hard to know whether he is smiling warmly or grinning mockingly. In portraits everywhere, he wears the modest khaki shirt of a Communist Party worker or the uniform of the generalissimo in full regalia.

Not much is known about him as a person—just that he wears comfortable Georgian boots and smokes his famous pipe and “Gertsogovina Flor” cigarettes, the most expensive in Russia. And female Young Pioneers present him with flowers during demonstrations on Red Square. Every time I come across a girl in a white blouse, with a red Pioneer tie on her chest and a big bow in her hair, I see her as a celebrity.

Three years earlier, I saw the film *Padenie Berlina* (The Battle of Berlin). It shook me up, because the director had managed to reflect in it my own attitude toward Stalin. The movie’s protagonist is Alexei Ivanov, a young Stakhanovite, a steelworker. The Communist Party secretary of his plant informs him that he has been invited to Moscow for a talk with Comrade Stalin.

Alexei turns pale. He’s dumbfounded. When he regains his speech, he refuses to accept the invitation: “I won’t go! I can’t even imagine. I’m not cut out for it! What could I say?”

“What could you say?” the party secretary laughs. “He’ll do the talking. And you only listen and absorb. You lucky dog! Such happiness befalls him, and he resists it!”

Listening to the party secretary's words, I couldn't figure out why Alexei has to go to Moscow. If all that Comrade Stalin wants him to do is to listen, can't he tell Alexei whatever he has to tell him over the phone? But Alexei is on his way. I was not prepared for what came next. I'd seen Stalin in other films—*Tretii udar* (The Third Blow), *Stalingradskaia bitva* (The Battle of Stalingrad), *Kliatva* (The Oath). In all of them, he's in his official capacity. He speaks from a rostrum or bends over a military map and gives instructions to his marshals. Their mouths agape, they absorb his every word and venture to exclaim from time to time, "Remarkable!" "Excellent!" or something of that sort.

There are many such scenes in *The Battle of Berlin*, but one scene caught me off guard. I froze. For the first time, I saw the genius of all mankind without his usual regalia in an everyday situation, as an ordinary citizen, resting in his dacha. The sleeves of his light jacket rolled up, Iosif Vissarionovich is standing in his garden. An ordinary shovel in his hands, he's tending to some little fruit trees. The sun is shining. Somewhere in the branches, birds burst into careless song. Stalin stops working, raises his face and smiles, listening to the birds. Off screen, female voices sing as if they were a chorus of angels.

Fear seized me. I slipped halfway down in my seat and covered my face with my hand. I just moved a finger so as not to miss what was coming on the screen.

On seeing Stalin, Alexei steps back. He tries to run away. He almost steps on his escort's feet and then nearly tramples down some rose bushes. Stalin, great and almighty—that's understandable. But for Stalin to be a simple mortal—that's too much for him.

"Hello, Vissarion Ivanovich!" Alexei finally utters in fright.

"That was my papa's name: Vissarion Ivanovich," Stalin corrects him softly. "And my name's Iosif Vissarionovich."

"Ah, I'll be damned!" Alexei says to himself. "I know, I know."

(Only many years later would I realize why the filmmakers—or, more to the point, Stalin himself—wanted Alexei to make such an implausible slip. Could any Soviet citizen ever forget the first and patronymic names of the "beloved leader and teacher"? This clumsy maneuver had one aim only—to let the masses know that, though Stalin, a Georgian, wasn't a son of the Great Russian people, he was their grandson at the very least, tied to them by blood. That was a deception. Stalin's grandfather's name wasn't Ivan, but Vano, a Georgian name that was Russified in documents by the tsarist authorities, who forced Georgians to use the Russian language as their official state language—policies that Stalin reinforced on his own watch. Equally deceptive was Stalin's warm reference to his father—"my papa." Years later, I would learn that, in fact, he hated his drunkard father, who beat the living daylights out of him and his mother. It came to be generally accepted that much of Stalin's cruelty was caused by his displaced hatred of his father.)

In the film, noticing Alexei's shyness, Stalin chuckles. He begins talking to him as a father would talk to his son. He pats him on the shoulder. And Alexei opens up to him as if confessing. He tells Stalin more than he would tell his own father—that he loves a girl and has trouble bringing himself to declare his love to her. And he gets Stalin's advice on his problem.

"Love her, and she'll love you in return," the leader says. "And if she doesn't, then write to me about it."

When I watched this movie, I was thirteen. Girls seemed to me touch-me-nots. And I envied Alexei. It would be good for me to have such an adviser on my side. As I understood Iosif Vissarionovich's words, it was in his power to make any woman take a strong liking to a man.

And now, March 4, sick with a sore throat, I'm lying in my bed. Uncle Misha leaves, and I switch on the radio. I hear the announcer's strange words: "hemorrhage taking over the brain area, the most important for life functions . . . paralysis of the right hand and leg . . . speech loss . . . disruption of heart and lung activity."

The name Stalin, uttered in this bulletin only once, seems to be included in this list of medical terms by sheer accident. Stalin and hemorrhage?

I listen carefully to each phrase: “up to 36 breaths per minute.” Hm, is it too many or too few? Tucking my blanket under me, a compress on my throat—a towel moistened with vinegar—I sit up in bed. I try checking my own breaths. Lacking a stopwatch, I lose count. Then I come to my senses. What am I doing? Stalin and I! What has my breathing to do with Stalin’s?

Every detail is confusing: “bloodletting by leeches has been administered.” Can it be that they’re curing Stalin in such an archaic way?

Perhaps because I’m running a fever, phrases from songs from my childhood are stuck in my head. In them, Stalin figures either by himself or in the company of his comrades-in-arms: “Comrade Voroshilov prepares us for the battles to come... We’ll meet our enemy as Stalin does.”

(Many years later, when it became known how Stalin really met our enemy, these lines mocked us. Though warned many times by his own agents about German intentions, when he was told about Hitler’s attack and lightening-fast capture of huge Soviet territories, of thousands and thousands of prisoners, our beloved leader fell into shock. Upset when Hitler attacked him without declaring war, he secluded himself in his office for about two weeks.)

“*Er is fartik!*” Uncle Misha says. “He’s ready. Done. He’s a 100 percent candidate.”

What nonsense: Stalin is a candidate for the other world?

The news from Moscow stirs up not only Uncle Misha but all our other relatives and our friends as well. None of them has a telephone at home. First one, then another appears in our apartment under various pretexts. We live a stone’s throw away, at the center of Odessa, in the middle of Deribas Street.

Aunt Clara and Uncle Abram are the first to come over. My aunt’s eyes shine in alarm and yet a vague hope. Some twenty years ago, Uncle Abram studied at a veterinary school. He is supposed to have a good idea about brain and heart functions. What’s his reading of the bulletin? Of course, Comrade Stalin and a calf are not one and the same, he says, but physically, like other mammals, they are ruled by the same laws of nature.

Uncle’s words horrify me: How is it possible to relate the leader and teacher of all progressive mankind to the category of mammals! As always, my uncle speaks a bit aggressively, as if beforehand attacking those who disagree with him. But nobody is in the mood to argue. Everyone’s silent.

“One thing’s clear,” my uncle says, “*es’s nisht gut*. Things aren’t OK.”

Mama’s friend Tanya, the pediatrician, comes in next, dark circles under her eyes, her face drawn. They haven’t fired her, as they had some other doctors, after the case of the Jewish doctors, “the murderers in white coats,” was made public seven weeks ago. But she doesn’t do much at work. People still don’t bring their children to her for fear she might poison them. She spends her days in an empty office, weeping and rewriting one old case history after another. Asked now about Stalin’s health problems, she responds silently, with a wave of her hand—that is, his demise is just a matter of time.

Another night passes. In my consciousness, Stalin’s image turns a bit human. I can manage the thought that Iosif Vissarionovich has been somewhat overworked. The morning broadcast announces: “Specific gravity of urine remaining normal, albumen and red blood cells discovered in it.”

Another wave of doubt comes over me. Stalin and urine? Back in the second grade, we learned by heart these lines from one of the poems about Stalin in our reader:

Over the Soviet land,
The light won’t be replaced by darkness:
Stalin the Sun shines above us.

What urine can the sun possibly have? I've been convinced for a long time that Stalin is not a regular person but a giant whose head is of extraordinary capacity, like that of the huge pot that Zaporozhian Cossacks kept on the open fire—the kind they used to cook kasha for their whole fraternity. This belief began one day when, stopping for stamps at our post office on the corner of Lanzheron and Karl Marx streets, I saw a slogan stretched over the whole wall: “No matter how busy I am, every day I manage to scan at least 500 pages.” J. Stalin. I realized my intellectual handicaps, and I shrank inside myself. And I'd considered myself a bookworm! “To be like Stalin is impossible,” I'd read in one book, “but to learn from him, with each act bringing oneself in line with Stalin's teaching—that's the goal toward which one should aspire.”

On the morning of March 6, I switch on the radio. The low note of a French horn. Chopin's funeral march. I hold my breath. It seems there's no end to the music pulling at my heart.

Finally, a radio announcer. Constantly stopping in order to swallow and take in air, his throat dried out from nervousness, he slowly rolls the words into the airwaves: “On March 5th, at 9:20 pm, without regaining consciousness, our dear and beloved leader passed away.” Resigned before resumption of play—a set phrase from chess championship reports, flashes in my mind. “Pathological and anatomical studies confirmed the diagnosis by medical authorities who had examined Stalin.” (Many years would pass before I'd understand why it was necessary to confirm the initial diagnosis. Seven weeks before Stalin's death, they had reported the arrest of “the murderers in white coats.” If the authorities hadn't assured people then, when Stalin died, no sabotage was involved in his case, that he had expired naturally, the news of his death could have fired up unrest in the country.)

And so, Stalin the Sun has suddenly stopped shining. I look out the window and am not surprised that the sky is covered with clouds, heavy, unpleasant, the color of milk turned sour, frozen in place.

The next day, all the theater billboards nearby are pasted over with rolls of blank paper. And that's understandable: what kind of entertainment can there be when the great leader is dead? Small worried groups gather on the street corners.

Often Odessans start up conversations without much reason, just to share their excitement about life. But now very little is spoken. The usual Odessan humor gives way to anxiety. If conversations do start, they're as haphazard as the clacking of pool balls by a rookie player. Before crossing the street, waiting for the green light, strangers exchange impressions of the day.

“It doesn't look good,” some say. “With him, we at least knew what to expect. And what's going to happen now?” “God willing,” others say, “things will turn out all right. We've survived somehow so far. We might just be surprised and fare no worse in the future.”

At the corner of Gavan and Deribas streets, leaning against the wall in utter exhaustion, his dirty shirt torn on his chest, some drunk shouts, “The damned kikes have poisoned Stalin! They've ruined our father!”

Nobody's stopping near him. Nobody feels like spending much time in the streets. Everyone hurries home, where everything's familiar. The same wallpaper with small flowery patterns, the same old dresser and wardrobe, the sagging couch, the bookshelf. The whir of the little primus stove and the whistle of the teapot are calming. Off, off the streets right now.

In the evening, we too sit silently around our dinner table and sip tea. Again, Uncle Abram and Aunt Clara come over. They bring with them their daughter, Eva, tears in her eyes. A big girl already, a seventh grader, she clings to her mama, who says that when the teachers told their classes about Stalin's death, all the girls began weeping. With a guilty smile, my aunt adds that Eva had joined them in thinking that war with America would start soon and that everyone would die of hunger.

Excited, his eyes rolling, my uncle Misha bursts into our apartment. He sits down at the table. Mama pours him tea, but he moves his glass, takes a half litter of vodka from his pocket, and bangs it down on the table.

“God himself has ordered us to wash down this news with alcohol. Let’s have a shot. What do you say?” he asks my father. Then he turns to my mother, “Sonya, do you have any snacks left?”

What’s with him? We’ve already had our dinner. In our house, vodka’s drunk only on big holidays. As if answering my thoughts, my uncle looks straight into my eyes and explodes, “Today is a holiday. Yes! If you want to know, the greatest holiday you can imagine!”

“Shush, shush!” Mama leaps up from her chair to make sure the windows are closed. She waves her hands in the air. As if goldfinches or canaries have somehow escaped from their cages, Mama is trying to keep my uncle’s words from breaking loose beyond our apartment. “What’s with you? Are you out of your mind? Why do you have to shout? Do you want to get us jailed? That’s what you want?”

“What are you afraid of, Sonya? What? Haven’t we been scared for too long? To drink to the dead is a custom. Let them think that we drink for the repose of his rotten soul!”

And then, without waiting for a shot glass, or snacks, or Papa’s company, my uncle empties his tea glass, pours the vodka from the bottle, and, bottoms up, tips it into his throat. Then he bangs the table again with an empty glass and yells, “That damned Yoska! Let him lie there on a bed of needles! It serves him right!”

His words take my breath away.

“Yes, yes!” my uncle turns toward me. “They brainwash you in school. How many people has he killed for no reason! For that bastard, death isn’t enough!”

I move away from the table into a corner. I have never heard such monstrous sacrilege. From my Komsomol viewpoint, my uncle is totally out of touch. But so much sincere hatred and bitterness are in his voice that I hear truth in the ring of his words. This truth is frightening.

On March 7, the day after Stalin’s death was announced, there is a knock on our door. It’s Yuri, a district police officer.

“What’s the matter, Yuri?” Mama asks the young man.

She’s on friendly terms with him; he likes Mama. He is disarmed by her charm, though distrusting people is his professional duty. He often turns to Mama, who serves as our neighborhood representative. She volunteered for this work to channel her excess energy, to become an active member of society, not just a housewife. (As I realized years later, her desire to be in contact with the agencies of Soviet power also served her as a means of learning what they had in mind and, if possible, of preventing any blows to our family.)

“Well, Soybel Wolfovna,” Yuri says. “You have a birthday coming up in your family, don’t you?”

The way Yuri addresses Mama tells me that the officer is about to tell her something important. Usually, when he expects Mama’s cooperation, he calls her by the name all our neighbors use—Sofia Vladimirovna, that is, by the Russian variant of her first and patronymic names. Addressing her according to the Jewish name in her ID papers, Yuri seems to underscore the strictly official character of his visit.

Mama is not used to responding right away to representatives of Soviet power. She waits for a few seconds: “W-well, let’s assume it’s true that tomorrow my younger son’s going to be five.”

“There’s must be no celebrating. The leader has died. Is that clear?”

I’m taken aback: Is it possible that Mama has become such close buddies with this police officer that she tells him about all our family events? I still have no idea that he is not actually questioning her about my brother’s birthday, that his question is merely a ploy to deliver his warning. (A district police officer along with an apartment house caretaker, *dvornik*, were the strongholds of the totalitarian regime. Everything about everybody was made known to the authorities. Our residence permits in the building register recorded our birthdays. Whether Yuri had received a directive from a local authority or orders had come from Moscow, or he himself decided that, when the leader died, the country should stand at attention—this would remain a mystery for me.)

“*Kushn mir in tokhes*,” Mama says as soon as the door closes behind Yuri. “Kiss my ass. This little twerp is going to tell me what I should do in my own home? Light the stove,” she tells me. And right away she starts kneading dough for her celebrated napoleon birthday pastry.

On Monday, March 9, as soon as I get to school, they announce that all classes are canceled for the day. But we can’t go home. Light trucks with collapsible benches inside arrive at the school entrance, and all high school seniors are ordered to board them.

They take us across the city to Kulik Field, a vast space beyond the railroad station. It’s unpleasant there, empty, windy. Usually, before the First of May and the October holidays, they build temporary grandstands here so that local party bosses can receive parades of garrison troops and the demonstrations of city workers. People never come here on their own. Anyone winding up nearby walks past, just as experienced hikers avoid marshy places.

The field turns blue with police raincoats. We jump off the trucks. I land quietly because I’m wearing the pride of my fatherland’s production—galoshes with red fleecy linings from the Moscow factory *Krasnyi treugol’nik* (the Red Triangle). According to our newspapers, these galoshes are the best in the world. It seems that, before the first Sputnik appeared, they were the only Soviet product that set world standards. But I hate galoshes in general. I see them as meant for old men. The day has promised to be wet, and Mama has insisted that I wear them. Usually, to avoid conflict with her, I put them on but remove them at school and shove them under my desk. Today I couldn’t get rid of them in the usual way.

Their noses red from the cold, the police line us up—all the Odessan high school seniors—opposite the grandstands, where there is a huge picture of Stalin, almost two stories tall, framed with branches of spruce and black ribbon. The grandstands are still empty; the party bosses are late. But the aluminum faces of the huge loudspeakers are aimed at us; they will broadcast the ceremony from Red Square.

The funeral march lowers our morale, which isn’t great to begin with. The nasty weather of the early Odessan spring is depressing. It’s cold and damp. A penetrating wind whistles in our ears and tears off the policemen’s caps. We stand, our eyes downcast. This seems proper not only at a funeral (even a virtual funeral) but also because we don’t dare raise our eyes to meet Stalin’s all-penetrating gaze. It seems that even his portrait is an X-ray machine capable of seeing through us. What if he decides that the sorrow in our souls is not what it should be—that is, not total, not overwhelming, not altogether unbearable?

We are starting to get chilled when, finally, sparkling with the radiators’ silver grills, black limousines roll up to the grandstands. The Odessan party bosses in their durable black coats alternate with the generals in their tall hats of gray lambskin topped with red. They line up in the stands. They look not at us but somewhere up there, at the sky covered with damp clouds.

The first voice heard from Red Square is Malenkov’s. I’ve seen his picture at the Pravda newsstand near my school. I haven’t yet formed an opinion of him, haven’t noticed anything special about him, except that he looks young. Fighting the boredom that has already taken hold, I try to tune in to his speech. But I soon give up. No matter how I try, my brain begins to spin over the surface of worn-out words: “Deep sorrow in our hearts . . . The gravest, unrecoverable loss . . . The greatest genius of mankind. . . His name will live in the ages . . . Our sacred duty.”

When, after Malenkov, Beria begins to drone on and on, I’m really tired and chilled to the bone. And when it’s Molotov’s turn to talk, I switch off altogether. The speeches seem endless. “He forged friendship among peoples . . . As a result of his tireless efforts . . . To develop an indissoluble tie with the people . . . To guard his legacies as the apple of one’s eye . . . In the spirit of infinite devoted service to our people . . . Let’s close ranks even tighter around the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the beloved Soviet government.”

No matter how I stamp my feet, I'm freezing. I've just been home with a sore throat. Could I be sick again?

Yes, I could. When I go home, I'm running a temperature. Mama sends me to bed right away. She starts to concoct *gogol'-mogol'*, her favorite homemade remedy of hot milk, butter, egg yolk, and sugar. I hope Mama won't add baking soda, as she usually does. Then her *gogol'-mogol'* becomes unbearable for me.

But everything works out fine. Maybe on the occasion of the death of the leader of all progressive mankind Mama takes pity on me. Maybe she is confused. Anyway, she forgets about the baking soda. Her concoction turns out to be tolerable. And, in a mysterious way, it even calms me down.

A few days later, I learn from the BBC that I wasn't the only victim of those long funeral speeches. Klement Gottwald, the leader of the Czechoslovakian Communists, has just died as a result of his exposure to the cold. Of course, now I can only guess what happened. He forced himself to endure the cold while standing for two hours, through the whole funeral. Moscow on the day of the funeral was even colder than Odessa. (Years later, I figured out that Gottwald had probably recalled the recent execution of his predecessor, Rudolf Slánsky, accused of treason for no apparent reason. Suffering from his chill, Gottwald may not have dared to leave the funeral before its end. Such a move could have been read as a kind of dissent.) On his return to Prague, he fell ill, and in a few days, he died. A source of consolation for him would have been the appearance of his picture on Pravda's first page, where he was called "a faithful follower of Stalin." Faithful indeed. Unto death.

But from the same broadcast, I also learn that many Russians died that day, but one would look in vain for their obituaries in Pravda. On the day of Stalin's funeral, thousands of weeping Muscovites—men, women, and children—rushed to Red Square to say the last good-bye to their leader. The crowd grew uncontrollable. Hundreds were trampled to death.

In Odessa, I get off with a sore throat.