

MAG044 – Case #9790302 – “Tightrope”

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GERTRUDE

Case 9790302. Yuri Utkin. Incident occurred in the village of Algasovo, central Russia, November 1952. Statement given 2nd of March 1979. Committed to tape 15th of April 1997. Gertrude Robinson recording.

GERTRUDE (STATEMENT)

As a child, I always loved the circus. I grew up in the little village of Algasovo, deep in the forest steppes. We were tiny, far below the notice of the district’s райсовет¹, and as such we were quite a poor community, with little hope of being added to the circus routes as anything but a waystation. Every year he would take my brother Ivan and me, and we would make the journey down to Morshansk to see the circus as soon as it arrived.

Jugglers, acrobats, wild animals... it took my breath away every time. My favourites were the clowns. Not as you

¹ “raysovet” or “district council”

would think of them; I've seen what you call clowns in this country, but back then clowns would actually tell jokes, not simply hit each other and fall over. I didn't always understand the jokes they told, but there was something intoxicating about sitting there, surrounded by people all laughing and cheering. Even if I didn't always share their amusement, I always shared in their joy.

I never liked the acrobats, though. I would watch them swinging from the top of the tents, leaping between the trapeze or walking their tightropes, and my chest would tighten, and all I could see in my mind would be the image of them falling to the sand-covered floor. I've never been afraid of heights myself, you understand; I used to spend half my summers at the top of the tallest trees I could find. When I was six, my best friend Piotr fell when we were climbing together. He survived, but broke his leg so badly that he still walks with a limp today. From that moment, that long terrible moment when I watched him fall, whenever I would watch the acrobats fly through the air it was all I could do not to close my eyes. Still, that doesn't change the fact that

my visit to the circus in Morshansk remains some of the happiest memories I have of my childhood.

One day in early November, the circus came to Algasovo. To say this was strange is to put it very mildly. As I've said, we were a small village, and far below the notice of the troupes that travelled the region. More than that, winter was beginning to set in, and it should have been many months before the touring season began again.

Then, as now, all circuses were owned and run by the government, something that is taken very seriously, so the idea that it might be an independent company that had simply found itself in Algasovo was unthinkable. There were always rumours of vagrants or travellers who would set up their own shows, but these would be small things, always half-ready to move on if someone reported them to the local СЕЛЬСОВЕТ². This circus was huge, easily as big as the ones I would see at Morshansk. The trucks rolled through the village shortly before dawn, and by the evening there it stood in the field to the east of town. Over the entrance stood a brightly

² "selsovet" or "village council"

painted wooden sign that read “Другой Цирк”³, “Another Circus”.

I begged my father to go. He was weary, but it became clear that almost everyone in the village was planning to visit, even if only so they knew what to report to the СЕЛЬСОВЕТ later. Soon a mob of us were heading through the icy November evening towards the colourful tents and bright lights. As we approached I heard a shrill, piping sound. I’d never before heard a steam organ - they had not been used in the other circuses I had visited, and I found the noise invigorating. There was something in its shriek that thrilled me, though it was the last time I would be able to hear such a sound without being filled with the deepest dread.

There was no fence around the outside, but instead the gate stood alone before the circus, with the name illuminated by gaslights either side. It was not a surprise that such a place would not have electricity like the ones in Morshansk, but still it seemed as though the flickering shadows cast by those lamps were starker than I was

³ “Drugoy Tsirk”

used to. Next to the gate stood a short woman in a leotard, seemingly oblivious to the cold. As the group of us approached, she began to wave with a slow, languid motion and called over for us to come in. The circus was open, she said, and all were welcome. Her voice was strange. The Russian she spoke was perfect, but her accent, her intonation were all wrong; each time she spoke it was abrupt and repetitive, like a scratched record.

If my father and his friends noticed, they didn't show any sign of it, though they were suspicious enough already. I didn't care. I was too excited about the circus. Ivan was even keener than I was, and upon hearing this invitation, he burst out of the crowd and ran eagerly through the gate. And then it was as though some spell were broken, and the wariness seemed to disappear all at once. My father took my hand and led me through under that bright sign, paying the five roubles for entry.

Beyond it there were more gaslights casting their pallid glow on tents and wagons. That whistling steam organ still played, giving the place a feeling of life and energy,

while the air was full of sweet smells. From behind the tent came the roar of a big cat, and I let go of my father's hand as I ran ahead to see. Sure enough, there, sat behind thick iron bars, was the vivid, orange face of a tiger. It regarded me with narrowed eyes, though it remained still. I was entranced. Its fur was shiny and thick, and its mouth curled open to reveal long teeth of brilliant white. I had seen bears and lions before, and once even an elephant, but I'd never seen a real-life tiger before. I leant closer, until all that was between us were six inches and some rusty iron bars.

As I stared at this beautiful creature in front of me, it moved its head. It was the strangest thing to watch. It seemed to shift its position slowly, like a doll having its joints twisted, but its face remained completely still. The mouth stayed curled to reveal its teeth, the ears stayed alert and pointed forward, and the eyes still stared out, though where they had at first seemed brilliant, they now had an almost glassy look to them. Without warning it roared, the same powerful cry of violence that I had heard before, but as it did so I fell back in surprise. The tiger's mouth had not moved.

As I scrambled back, I felt a large hand on my shoulder, and looked up to see two huge men in overalls. They lifted me easily, so my feet hung almost two feet from the ground. They talked fast, crude Russian, and their words seemed to shift back and forth between them, telling me that behind the tent was off limits, and that I should leave the tiger alone as it wasn't ready to perform yet. At least, that's what I thought they'd said at the time. It was only later that it struck me their exact phrase had been that the tiger "wasn't finished". They carried me back to my father and placed me down next to him. He thanked them, and asked me if I'd seen my brother.

Ivan had not returned after he ran off through the gate, and my father was growing concerned. He was standing talking to a pale man in a flamboyant red coat, whom I took to be the ringmaster. This brightly-dressed man said there was no reason to be alarmed, that he would ask his people to be on the lookout, and that Ivan would no doubt return when the show was about to start. There was much to explore in the circus, he told my

father patiently, and children often let their excitement get the better of them in this strange new place, but they had never lost one yet. This last part he said with a smile that I think was supposed to be reassuring, but reminded me too much of the tiger with its shiny, unmoving teeth.

I left them arguing there and went off to find Ivan. In my ten-year-old's mind I was sure that I would be able to figure out where my younger brother had wandered to. I would return triumphant, and my father would tell all the village of how well I had done. As I walked, I became fascinated by the flickering gaslights, some clear and bright, others behind coloured glass, and decided that Ivan would also have been drawn to them. So I followed them round the tent, and through the wagons and trucks, until I found myself standing before a smaller tent, set off to the side of the big top. There was another wooden sign across the top. This one appeared to be written in English; I did not then understand what it said. Knowing what I know now, I believe it said, "Freak Show".

Now you must understand that the freak show was not part of a Soviet circus. Indeed, I believe even in America the practice has been out of fashion for many, many years, so I did not have any idea what to expect when I went in looking for Ivan. What I saw inside is one of the main reasons that I am so sure that my experience deserves to be in your library. It's the reason I went to Moscow to study medicine, for the people, if such they can be called, that I saw in there were of such grotesque proportion and bodily forms that I became obsessed with learning how it was they might still live.

It was only when I was many years into my medical training that I finally accepted that, scientifically, such things were not possible. A mouth cannot function if it's located anywhere other than the face. Limbs cannot bend like rubber. A man cannot walk and talk and stare without a head. You will, I hope, forgive my lack of precise descriptions. It has been 27 years since that night, and I can no longer clearly distinguish between what is memory and what is nightmare.

I walked along the row of cages. Those few other patrons who had found their way to this tent turned around quickly, leaving with pale faces and shaking legs, but I was determined to find Ivan. I closed my eyes as I walked, opening them only momentarily every few steps to check if he was there. I called out, but there was no reply, either from my brother, or from the silent things in their cages. Finally, I reached the end of the tent. The last cage was empty, save for a large hessian sack. It was tied by thick rope, wrapped around so tightly that it bulged through the gaps in its binding. I took momentary comfort in the fact that it was far too big to be Ivan. Still, I found myself approaching it, curiosity momentarily overcoming my growing sense of dread. Then, in the distance, the steam organ began to play, announcing the start of the show, and the bag began to move.

It contorted itself, pulsing and throbbing like a wounded animal's stomach, and fell heavily forward. I screamed and fled out into the frozen night. It was only when I was about to pass back out through the wooden gates that I stopped, remembering that, even if Ivan had fled

like me, my father was still in this terrible place. I resolved to rescue him, and turned back towards the main tent. Light spilled out of the open entrance, as the steam organ kept playing.

I entered to see two clowns fighting. Not the slapstick routines of the clowns I'd been used to, rife with wordplay and satire, but a crunching violence I had never seen before. One of them, huge and scowling in white and purple polka-dots, pinned down its smaller companion, whose bright yellow shirt was now streaked with red. With each blow from the big clown, the crowd, among whom I could clearly see my father, howled with laughter and cheers. The laughter didn't sound right. None of it was right. It was as though I was looking at a tent full of vicious strangers, every one of whom wore a face I had known since birth.

Then my gaze drifted upwards, to the tightrope stretched between the towering tent poles, and my heart stopped. Halfway across, tottering on legs too short to balance properly, was Ivan. Everything else was forgotten as I watched him there, and the sounds of the

world around me faded away. The question of how he had got up there, or made it halfway along that thin metal wire, didn't even enter my mind. I could think of nothing but that next step that would send him tumbling to a floor caked in sand, greasepaint and blood.

No-one else in the audience or the ring seemed to have noticed him up there, and my throat had closed too tight to call to them. I could do nothing but watch as Ivan took another step along the tightrope. He swayed to one side, then the other, and I could see he was crying, tears falling to the floor like single drops of rain. He took another step. And then another. He did not fall. I watched in amazement as my seven-year-old brother walked and walked. My heart was still clenched in fear, and I could not breathe. Ivan took his final step, lifted his right foot, and placed it upon the platform on the opposite tent pole. He had made it. He gripped the pole and moved around it and out of sight.

I do not know how long I had stood there watching, but it seemed like only a moment later I felt my father's hand grip me by the shoulder. I turned to see him

standing there with Ivan by his side. He had a look on his face as though he had eaten something that had spoiled, and without a word he led us out of the circus and back to our home. The field was empty by the next morning.

No-one in our village ever spoke of that night, and when the state circus came to Morshansk the next year, my father did not offer to take us, and we did not ask.

For many years, I thought that it might have been some strange dream or distorted memory, as no-one ever acknowledged that it had happened. But I asked Ivan about it when we were older, and he hesitantly said that he remembered the circus coming, but everything after running through the gate was a blur. I pressed him further on the subject, and he just shook his head. He didn't remember what happened, he said, but he still got terrible nightmares. Every November, around when the circus had come to Algasovo, he would dream that he was there again. He could smell the sawdust and hear the steam-organ playing, but he could not move. In the dream he would find himself tightly bound with coarse

rope and trapped inside a thick hessian sack. I remembered those nights. He always woke up screaming.

GERTRUDE

Final comments: sounds, from what I can tell, like Yuri Utkin and his brother were rather lucky in their encounter with the circus, as both escaped with only significant mental trauma. A decidedly tame result for a run-in with Gregor Orsinov's troupe, especially as this would have been during the height of their tour. If it was in the 70s, after Denikin had left, then maybe it would come as less of a surprise, but as it stands, I think it somewhat amazing that the whole town appears to have made it through in one piece. Obviously it's a good thing the children survived, but it does pique my interest in Ivan Utkin. Unfortunately, he appears to have passed away in 1984, but he must have been something rather special.

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ARCHIVIST

Supplemental. This is the first of the tapes I have received from Basira.

Luckily it appears that Gertrude was not as lax in properly marking *these* tapes as she has been the rest of the archive. While it provides some interesting context for Leanne Denikin's statement, and this strange circus, I will admit to some disappointment it doesn't address any of my more pressing questions about Gertrude's tapes.

Why did she begin recording them? And why stop? If she'd been doing so right up until her death, she would've likely gotten through much of the archive, and... moreover I wouldn't have had to find this tape player tucked away in the storage room, covered in dust and cobwebs.

Moreover, she clearly knows a lot more about what is going on than I had previously assumed. This is far from the first time she has encountered 'The Other Circus', or 'The Circus of the Other', or however it translates. I

suppose I'll have to return the tape to Basira, and wait until she can get me another one. It is infuriating to have to simply... wait like this, but there is little else I can do.

Additionally, I think someone may have found these... secret tapes. They do not appear to have been disturbed, but the drawer in which I kept them is slightly more open than I left it. I have not mentioned it to the others, as if any of them did open my drawer for innocent reasons, then I don't want to let them know there is anything significant about the tapes inside. I have prised up one of the floorboards, and will be hiding them beneath there from now on.

End supplement.

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