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Mat. Agapia Minchenkova, 2009.

NARROW ESCAPES OF GRACE

Mat. Agapia Minchenkova, an Orthodox nun who lives with her sister Zenaida in their home a hundred yards from the gate of Optina Monastery, talks about her tumultuous childhood during WWII, and her astonishing mid-life adventures following a career as head of Russia's State Higher Education Diploma Commission. Matushka Agapia held us spell-bound through a day and night of reminiscences; we guarantee you'll never read anything like this.

1941-1945

Today in Russia and elsewhere, you can still find people who claim that life was good under Stalin, but because of their "beloved Stalin," during World War II my sister and I, as young children, found ourselves in a concentration camp. Some think that World War II concentration camps existed only under the fascists in Germany, but in fact, Russia had them also.

My father and mother, Nikolai and Anna Belaev, worked at a plant in Fili, a region of Moscow, building military aircraft. As a gesture of goodwill after the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact was signed, Stalin invited Hitler to Moscow; and so, a month before Germany declared war, a German delegation headed by Hitler himself came to see our plant. Molotov¹ led the tour, and in honor of the occasion, the workers—both men and women—received light blue shirts, dark blue trousers and berets to wear as "uniforms". The Germans were treated as honored guests and examined everything very closely, and no one hid the fact that the planes on the airfield were not yet assembled. To the very last moment, Stalin was assured that Germany would never break the Russian-German treaty, although our spy, Richard Sorge²

¹ Vyacheslav Molotov (1890-1986): A leading member of the Soviet government, who rose to power in the 1920's as Stalin's protégé and was later dismissed from Party leadership during Krushchev's anti-Stalinist campaigns. The "Molotov Cocktail" petrol bomb was derisively named after him.

² Richard Sorge: Raised in Germany, Sorge became a Communist and moved to Russia in 1925, from where he established spy rings in Germany and China. His greatest success was in Japan, where he posed as a German correspondent and Nazi Party member, infiltrating Tokyo's elite political circles, including the Japanese Imperial Court. In 1941, he informed Moscow that Hitler was preparing to attack Russia. Stalin's disbelief caused untold casualties when the Germans suddenly invaded on June 22, just as Sorge had predicted. Sorge's further assurance that Japan would not invade Russia freed 250,000 troops from Siberia to move to the western front, which saved Moscow from invasion by the advancing Germans. Sorge's advice had changed the course of the war, but because he was a reminder of the initial blunder, he was never publicly acknowledged during Stalin's regime.

from Japan had already communicated that Hitler was preparing for war.

A month later, when Germany unexpectedly and cruelly declared war on Russia, this plant was the first to be bombed as the most important strategic object in Moscow. As the bombs began to fall, the panicked workers fled. Many of those who managed to reach the bomb shelters were killed nonetheless, as Germany was also well aware of the shelter locations. When the first victims of the bombing appeared on the streets, it was clear to everyone that war had begun.

Mama told me that when she heard the bombs falling, all she could do was pray, “Lord have mercy on Thy servants!” She herself was saved because she wasn’t able to get to a bomb shelter; she’d thrown herself into a gully on the side of the road.

As soon as Stalin was informed of the attack, within moments of the bombing, he ordered that the plant immediately relocate to Kazan; our fate was decided. You can imagine how large the aircraft plant was, based on the fact that there were over 800 children just in the day-care collective for the children of workers, and Stalin acted quickly. The moment the news was telephoned in, he ordered that the children be immediately evacuated from the factory collective, because he knew that otherwise the workers would not leave their Moscow flats. This was true—most relocated only because of the children.

Long afterwards, our mother told us that when the bombing began, her mind, as with all of the parents, was filled with one burning thought: “Where are the children?” Bombs were falling everywhere. All of the parents were asking this, and they were told, “Your children are being evacuated to Kazan.”

I was only three years old at the time, my sister Zenaida was six, but memories of these years still arise as flashing moments of impression. Now, even at 65, I remember the closed gates of the kindergarten, the endless line of buses full of crying children, and the shrieking mothers who had left their work stations to run to the buses.

As they loaded us onto the buses, we heard the terrible cries of our mothers pounding on the gates. Stretching their arms through the bars, they sobbed out our names, not knowing if they would ever see their beloved children again. Their cries have echoed in my ears all of the years since: I couldn’t understand why my own mother was crying because we were being saved, we were being taken away from the bombing! Many years later, mother told me that never in her life was she so caught by fear as on that day. And the things that mother feared so deeply did indeed come to pass for most of us.

The meaning of what happened at that time only became clear to me much later, when I was already a nun at Optina, together with faith and the certainty of one single thing—that we all are in God’s hand. But at that time nothing was clear.

When we arrived at the Volga, the authorities transferred us from the buses onto a ship that was to take us down the river to Kazan—but even about this, no one knew for sure. The uncertainty was terrible. Stalin was planning to build a completely new aircraft plant in Kazan, and our parents were told that they would join us there once the factory’s machinery was evacuated. The teachers and nursemaids who were to accompany us, however, sensed that this journey would end very badly, and almost all of them took their own children and left us before we were led onto the ship. (Now, after having had my own children, I understand their feelings.) The only person who stayed with this huge crowd of children was a heroic teacher named Nina Vassilievna. I remember her name after all of these years.)

Just imagine, an entire vessel filled with 800 badly frightened and lonely children. Our parents had been repeatedly assured that the children would go directly to Kazan and that they should be ready to follow us quickly. Mother left immediately, with my eight month-old sister, who had been left at home ill with a neighbor on the day of the bombing. Their trip to Kazan took several months as they were stopped repeatedly in the confusion of the war and had to make many detours. Most of the way they were without clean water or almost anything to eat. They drank straight from the puddles in the streets, and imagine, nothing happened to them—no dysentery, nothing.

When the parents arrived in Kazan, however, none of the children were there. German troops were advancing, and we had been taken instead to a small village near the Volga riverside town of Khvalynsk in the Saratov region. Hope dies slowly, and my father and mother worked day and night, as everyone worked at the Kazan plant, believing that we would meet again.

Two years passed, and the war still raged. No one had permission to leave the grounds, and all workers took double shifts. Every plane that was built in the Kazan factory had a test flight before it was sent to the front, and the chief of the airfield, who did these test flights, was the father of one of the missing children. Mother later told us that one day he came to her and said, “Anna, today I’m going to break the rules. They keep telling us that our children are behind the front line near Khvalynsk. I have only one daughter, so I am going there to see for myself what is happening. I have to make a test

flight, and I'm going tonight." What he couldn't know was that, of the 800 children, only thirty were still alive. The others had all died of hunger.

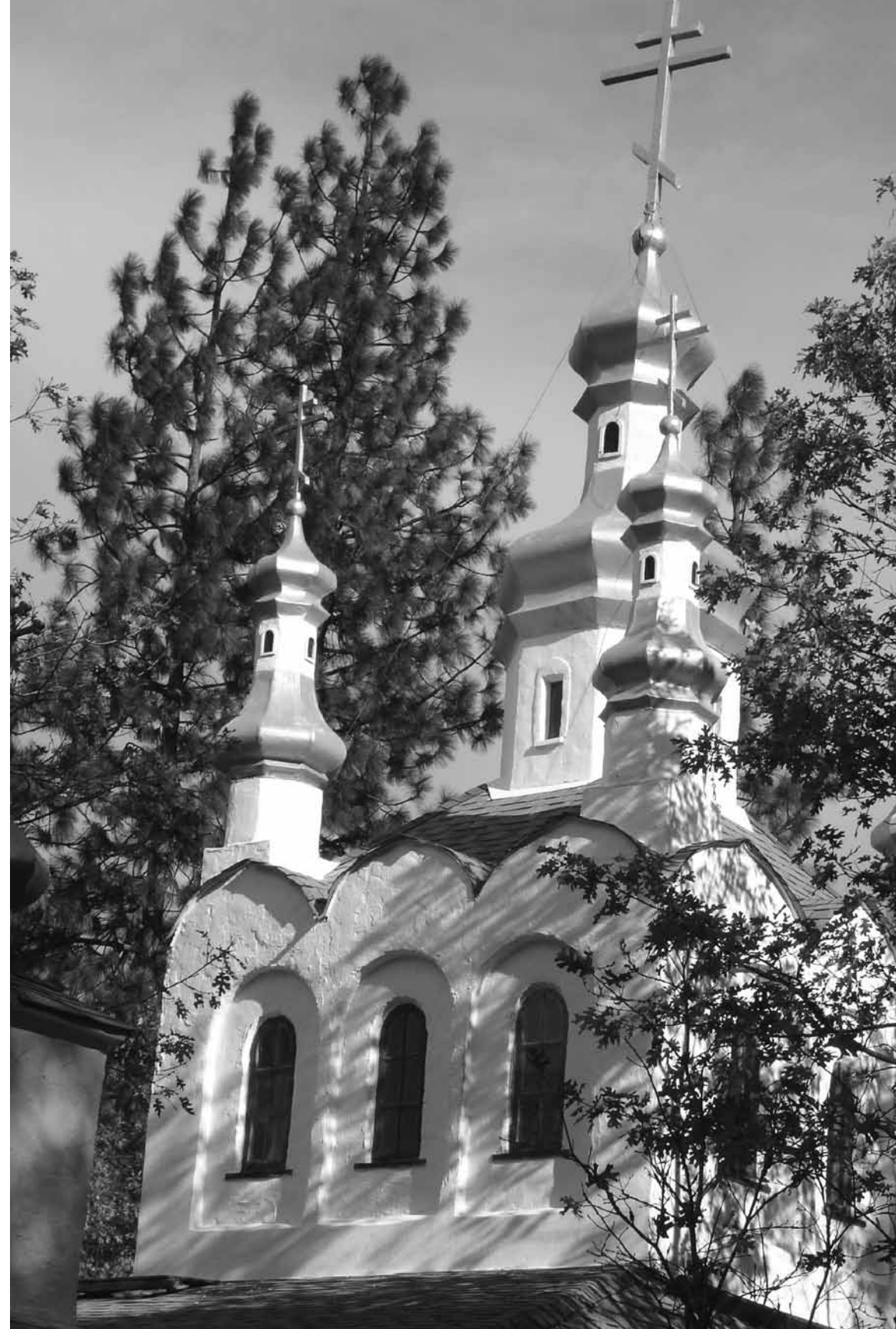
I remember the day that the chief of the airfield came to visit, because for us surviving children, it was a day of celebration. We were given a very strong-smelling raspberry soap, so that, for the first time, we could have a proper bath. Before that, "bath day" had meant an empty box into which we put the lice we picked off ourselves and each other. The soap smelled so nice that every one of us ate it immediately, without a second thought. For us, it was like cake. This was because we had been living for two years on the edge of starvation, left to God's providence. I clearly remember fighting with my sister for some rotten potatoes that we found in the garbage. You can only imagine what deadly hunger we had.

When this chief landed his secret flight, only to discover that his beloved daughter was dead, he began to cry and sob so bitterly that I will never forget it. We children couldn't understand why he was crying so, but nevertheless we joined him. We also didn't understand that it was only by God's blessing and mercy that we were among the thirty children left alive.

I tell this after sixty years, and the tears stream down my face like a river, just exactly as they did then. This pilot asked the authorities to show him his daughter's grave, and they showed him a huge pit in which they had buried all of the children. This man immediately flew back to Kazan and when he arrived at the factory, he told everyone, "We've been cheated, we've lost our children." Mother said that the cries that went up at his news were heard to the far reaches of heaven.

In protest, the workers went on strike, not even caring that they would be fired—which in those days meant almost certain starvation. Throughout the war, if you were late by even five minutes you would almost certainly be fired. When the news reached Moscow, Stalin and Molotov quickly arrived at the factory and ordered that the surviving children be immediately brought to Kazan. Now there were only twenty-six of us left, and we were half dead. Instead of those long, long lines of buses that had taken the children from Moscow, we were put into a single small green bus. Our route went through Khalynsk, and with the humid, stuffy air of that summer, all of the windows were open. At a crossing where we stopped for a red light, I saw a man walking beside the bus with a handful of red currants. I stretched my thin little arm through the window and he put some of the currants into the palm of

Opposite: St. Herman of Alaska Monastery, Platina, California.



my hand. I began weeping with joy and put them straight into my pocket, “for a black day”. More than death itself, we feared hunger.

As we came through the gates of the factory, instead of forty buses, there was one. Lord, have mercy! What most impressed my five-year-old heart was the grief of those countless mothers and grandmothers. Miraculously, though, my sister and I were both still alive.

(To this account, I want to add something that almost no one knows. Many Spanish children were also evacuated to Europe in 1937-8 during the Spanish Civil War, and three thousand were sent to Russia, where they fared the same fate as we did. Many went first to southern Russia, to regions more like Spain where it was easier to live, but when the war began they were sent to the north for safety. Like everywhere, food shortages and malnutrition took their toll, and in one of the orphanages, like in my own story, all except three of them died. A friend of mine once met one of these three survivors in Spain, who told him their story.)

Around the time that we returned, my parents received a small room of their own on the top floor of a four-story house, so they were able to move out of the dormitories. We were together now, but for a long time after my sister and I were freed from the camp, the experience of that terrible hunger wouldn't loosen its grip on us. For months and even years after, when mother cooked potatoes, we would carefully collect the peels and hide them under the pillow. That was the place where we put whatever we were given—bread, crumbs, anything.

At that time, I was nearly six and Zenaida was nine, and soon after our return, evacuees from the Leningrad blockade³ were brought in and billeted with different families. In our house we had a woman with two children. Compared to us who were nearly dead, they were even worse off. We gave them a place in the bathroom and put wooden boards down as a bed. The three lay embracing each other, too exhausted to move a muscle. Being so small, I didn't understand that they only had a few hours to live, but my heart was burning with compassion towards them. I kept bringing them things to drink, and I desperately wanted to help them in one way or another. But the adults said, “This is hopeless,” and indeed, they quickly died. Even now I feel the acute compassion that I had for these strangers.

³ Leningrad Blockade: From 1941-43, 872 continuous days of siege by Axis forces. This was one of the worst sieges in history with 1, 500,000 of the city's residents dying of hunger, and another 1,400,000 evacuating, many of whom died of starvation on the way.

On a lighter note, because of my parents' intensive factory work we were given a premium—Goat #13. The army had taken cows, goats and other livestock from the occupied territories, and my mother and other workers were given a chance at a lottery: her ticket read, “Goat #13.” The goat lived right in our living room, which was empty if you didn't count the little table. #13 never gave milk, though our neighbor had taken Goat #16, which gave three liters of milk a day—but #13 made us children very happy and joyful. We would ride her by turn when our parents were out.

Then, all of a sudden, in 1945, it was victory! I remember my mother coming back from the night shift, and it was only then that I finally saw my father. For two years he hadn't been allowed to leave the factory. I remember all of us crying and embracing. It was difficult to believe that the nightmare had ended.

1988 - 2010

In 1988, I was in deep grief because of two things that had happened that year. My beloved daughter, who had never been baptized, died quite suddenly. More prosaic than that was the second blow when, after thirty years of marriage, my husband went off with his secretary. He simply said “Good-bye,” and left for this young girl. At first I was in shock and didn't know what to do; I then became depressed and finally fell into great despair. This was 1988, the 1000-year celebration of the Baptism of Rus. It was an historical moment, like a gate opening to a new time, but in my depression, I couldn't celebrate anything.

Then someone told me about a company recruiting Russian housekeepers for wealthy émigré Russians in America. This was a time when many Russian Jews were leaving for America, and they wanted Russian-speaking governesses and housekeepers. Mostly they wanted Orthodox Christians because they knew that because of their high principles, the Orthodox wouldn't rob them and that they could be easily cheated. We didn't know these details, of course, but after months of grief a friend said, “Maybe, I'll send you to America, so that you come to your senses.” This didn't sound like a bad idea, but I knew it was almost impossible to get a visa. Nevertheless, I applied to the company, and a strange and shocking thing happened. While most people waited for visas for months and years, if they ever received them, my visa to America was given in a week. Now I know that it was an illegal connection of some kind, and I have to say that when I took this passport with



the stamped American visa in my hands, I heard the voice of my angel say: “Why are you taking this? What do you need this for?”

For many years I had held a high-ranking position as the head of the state commission that granted diplomas for the Soviet Union’s technical schools, institutes, and universities. I was acquainted with professors, academics, scientists, and other prominent people of our time, many of whom would gather to eat, drink, and talk politics all the night through. After years of this, I thought, “They’ve talked all of their lives, but what have they changed in this life? Nothing.” So, I spoke of leaving. Everyone thought it was a joke: “The head of the commission is leaving for America forever!” To even consider replacing me as head of this commission required permission and special orders from the Kremlin, but feeling that I desperately needed a change, as soon as I got the visa I quickly packed up and flew to America without telling anyone.



Hieromonk Seraphim Rose, 1978.

Around this time, I’d encountered three books that had changed my life: the Psalter, the newly published fifth volume of the collected works of St. Ignaty Brianchaninov, and *Not of This World: The Life of Father Seraphim Rose*⁴, which had just appeared in Russia. I especially loved the Psalter. When I first read the 90th psalm, I was shocked and asked myself, “Why have we bothered to write anything since, when it was all said 3000 years ago?” This was the early 1990’s, and after reading about Father Seraphim Rose, I thought that California would be the right place to look for a solution to my problems. (*laughter*) Now I see that this was unwise. One should never take to Orthodoxy in such an abrupt way.

When my son heard that I was going to America to be a housekeeper, he said, “Mother! You’ve been caught by the mafia! I’ll give you money, anything, but stay here.” Everyone thought that I’d gone crazy over the shocks

⁴ Revised edition published in the U.S. as *Father Seraphim Rose: His Life and Works*, St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, Platina, CA, 2003. (ISBN 1887904077).

Opposite: St. Herman of Alaska Monastery, where Fr. Seraphim Rose lived until his repose in 1982.

of 1988, and that I should just go to a sanitarium to rest. Although I'd told them all my plans, up until the last minute they assumed it would never come about. When my son found out that I'd actually gone to the airport, he called a friend to ask for a ride, "Quick, she's really leaving!" I remember him saying goodbye at the airport. He was wiping his tears away with his fur hat, pleading, "Mama, please don't go."

The only thing I had in my purse was the Psalter, the fifth volume of Ignaty Brianchaninov's writings, and some paper icons. When the customs agents asked, "And what are you taking with you to America?" I replied, "Icons." They said, "Ah, show us!" thinking I was smuggling out Russian art treasures. I showed them the paper icons, and then they decided I was a little crazy. I didn't know a single word in English at that time and I still smoked, so when they asked me at the desk, "What class are you in?" I said, "Smoking Class." During the eight hours of the flight, I smoked continually and read the Psalter. Sitting next to me was the sister of the great Russian cellist and conductor Mstislav Rostropovich, who was scared to death of flying and grabbed hold of me very often. I said to her, "Don't be scared. I have so many sins that it's impossible that I won't live to make confession. We won't crash." When we got to New York, we were met by Rostropovich and his wife, the opera singer Galina Vishnevskaya. They immediately understood my situation, and said, "You've been taken in by the mafia. Turn around and fly home."

They would have helped me, but I didn't let them; I wanted a new life. I had no money, no credit, nothing, not a single penny, because my "employers" had said that they would meet me and take care of everything. Someone helped me to find the bus to transfer to another airport for the flight to California that the agency had arranged, but I didn't have a single penny to pay for the bus. A Russian man finally paid for me, looked at my ticket, and told me when to get off. When I got out, I was in an empty airport, with no one there except a guard. After awhile some other people came in—an Armenian man with his family who somehow understood that I was in trouble. He tried to talk to me with a few words of Russian and many gestures. He helped me telephone the bosses who had hired me in Los Angeles, but they said, "The airport is empty because your flight is two days from now. You must wait."

This Armenian family, however, were very decent people. They had their own plane and they invited me to go with them. I thought that we were flying straight to Los Angeles, but instead they landed in Las Vegas. When I saw the casinos, I thought it looked like hell, and I said, "I need Los Angeles, not

Las Vegas." But the Armenians had understood that I was stranded in that empty airport in New York without anything to eat or drink, so they'd taken me to Las Vegas, where they fed me and then put me on a flight to L.A. They paid for everything. I think now that God sent this help because I'd been reading the Psalter. Reading psalms can do anything.

When I got to Los Angeles, I looked all over the airport for someone meeting me with a sign, but there was nothing with my name on it. I didn't know it at the time, but the woman who had hired me had been the madam of a brothel in Odessa. She was off on her own dirty business and didn't care what happened to me, so I stayed in the airport for five days and was fed by the black baggage handlers and cleaning ladies. Suddenly on the fifth day, I heard my name announced over the loudspeaker. The Odessa "beauty" had arrived at last. I was 49 years old that year, and still very good-looking, with nice neat clothes and earrings. She looked me over critically and said, "You're going to marry here."

The next day, this woman placed me with a Russian Jewish family for \$1000. The only thing I got out of the deal was a pack of cigarettes. (Now you understand why they chose Orthodox people.) This family had gathered all of the children of five brothers and sisters together, and gave them to me to take care of. Instead of five families paying \$5000 for five housekeepers, they paid \$1000, and I had to take care of twelve children. Although they told me, "We're taking you on as a teacher so that our children don't forget Russian," in reality I had to clean their huge house: wash the floors and windows, take care of six dogs, twelve children, and every evening prepare a dinner for the family and up to twelve guests. But thank God I wasn't sold to Turks. A harem would have been worse. [Matushka's sister, who is listening, chimes in here, "They don't have such people as this in Turkey!"]

I was a very good cook, but the smart girls who came to America would always say, "We can't cook. All we can do is to boil a chicken," so their families would hire a cook as well. All of us were sold to extremely wealthy people, and our passports were taken away by the bosses so that even if we gathered some money, we couldn't leave. One of the children I took care of was a nine year-old Little Miss America. These children had shops full of toys, unbelievable mountains of toys, but not much real life, so I tried to make it more normal. Their parents complained, however, when they found out that I was making the children get up early to take cold baths with me for health. I've always loved nature, so I often took them out into a nearby wilderness area.

We had to creep under a fence to get into the woods, but then we would light a bonfire and cook potatoes on sticks and sing songs. I was always surprised that there weren't more people in such a lovely place. When the parents found out, they were shocked, because it turned out that this was a wildlife preserve, with lions and tigers running loose.

It seemed to me that half of this immense house was a refrigerator, but when I ate their store-bought food, I didn't feel safe at all, and began cooking everything for the family myself—simple, nice food. But I suffered for this kindness, because almost every day they would say, "We have guests coming tonight." During these dinners, I compared the conversations I heard with those back home. If back in Russia it was only politics, in Los Angeles, it was Russia—everything and anything concerning Russia.

Once I remember there was a flood, and everything in Los Angeles was underwater. Our house had French windows onto the garden and when we opened them a tide of water rushed in, and the dogs all jumped into the water. They had me feed these dogs with what, in 1991-2, we used to call "Bush legs..."—you remember what I mean—during the first Bush administration American farmers fed their chickens hormone-supplemented feed to make them grow faster and they exported huge quantities of these plump chicken legs to Russia. There were severe shortages and people would stand in long lines and even fight to buy these coveted chicken legs. These people knew how hard it was to get this chicken in Russia and they told me, "Don't tell anyone that we feed this to our dogs." At the same time they were so greedy that they told me, "Don't feed that old dog with chicken, give him the cheap food."

Still, this hard life must have been good for me because after a few weeks, I started coming out of the shock and depression in which I had lived for so long. I decided then to give these people a real Orthodox education and began putting up my paper icons everywhere.

When I finally discovered that I was caring not for one family of children, but five, I raised a protest. Then, these five families tried to buy me from the Odessa woman, so that they could control me, but she said, "No, this is my business," and she took me from those families and sold me to another. She did this three times, selling me each time for thousands of dollars. I was a slave.

The husband of the second family was the head of an obstetrics/gynecology department at a famous hospital in Los Angeles. He was American-born,

Opposite: St. Xenia Skete, Wildwod, California.



and his wife was Russian Jewish, but there was something very strange going on in that house—it felt demonic, and I say that with good reason—so I called the Odessa woman and said, “Take me away from this place.”

With the third Russian Jewish family, I didn’t have a single day off for three months. St. Xenia of Petersburg’s feast is the 6th of February on the civil calendar and my birthday is the day after, so I asked for the day off and found a Russian Orthodox Church dedicated to the Mother of God. As I entered the church I saw to the right of the doors a small icon of St. Xenia, and I began crying loudly, begging God’s help to live somehow. From that moment I stopped smoking (except for one other time) and I was continually reading the psalms.



Icon of St. Xenia of Petersburg.

In that church I met an Orthodox priest who gave me money for a ticket to San Francisco (I still wanted to go to Father Seraphim Rose’s monastery, and even wondered if I could stay in the monastery and become a nun), but when I told him about my situation, he was very afraid for me. He said, “You are mixed up with the mafia. You’re working here illegally and they aren’t paying taxes. If you just leave, they will hunt for you.” But when I went

to sleep that night, I saw St. Xenia in a dream, who said, “You must serve God, not Satan.” I asked, “How can I do this if they have my passport?” Xenia said, “I will help you,” and I woke up with this in my mind.

The priest was right. Neither the family nor my “bosses” let me go to San Francisco, and I was so upset at having been sold into slavery that I finally just exploded. This third house had a whole wall filled with shelves of every possible wine and liquor, and one day I flew into a rage. I broke many of their bottles, spilled cognac all over everything, and drank a good bit myself. When they came home that evening, they found me acting not like the housekeeper but like a householder, laying on their lounge in the garden in my nightgown—with a drink in one hand, a cigarette in the other, and gazing at the stars. Their faces suddenly appeared on my horizon—“What the hell are you doing out here?”

Somehow, this was Providence too—I think it was St. Xenia who made me forget myself like this. I had made such a disaster that they called the Odessa woman saying, “Russians are all drunkards, take her away.” A few hours later, I saw a big car come up the drive and I understood that it was coming for me. Although I was barefoot, I took off running for my life. I ran up the street and into the bushes. They were all searching for me, and when I was completely out of breath and couldn’t run anymore they caught me. They swore at me and said, “What do you think you’re doing?” I answered, “I’m resting from you.” They forced me into the car and took me to a house far up in the mountains. This was the first time that I finally saw who had really recruited me: three mafia bosses. They were tough and angry and said, “We’re sick of you. We’re going to beat you ‘till you can’t walk and then throw you in the dump, like the garbage you are.”

I replied, “You’ll do nothing to me. Xenia of Petersburg will help me. You won’t succeed with anything.” “Who is she?” they demanded. I said, “She’s the one who slept among the graves and built churches.” They thought I’d gone crazy, and they looked at one another and said, “Airport!” They put me back in the car and we drove and drove, until we arrived at an airport. It was one of those charter airports, and like the one in New York, there was almost no one there. After drinking all of that cognac and then running away, I was very thirsty. Although all of the food stands were closed and there was absolutely no one around, I suddenly saw a full glass of cold Coca-Cola on the empty counter next to me. I took it, and when they turned to look at me, the bandits demanded, “Where did you get that?” I said, “Matushka Xenia gave it to me.”

So, they returned my passport and said, “You’ve been nothing but a pain in the ass for us.” I replied, “You didn’t even meet me the first five days I was here. Now, you’re packing me off like a princess.” They said, “We’d have been better off to leave you at the airport in the first place; you’ve seen America at our expense.” I said, “And what have you gotten from America? You have plenty to eat and drink, cars, clothes, pools, furniture, but you have no soul and no grace. I’m going to write a book about you.”

So, I went to America without a penny, and came back without a penny. The only thing that those Jewish mafiosos gave me was two bunches of bananas. When I got on the plane in New York, I said to the man sitting beside me, “Buy me a glass of cognac, I’m going home to Russia.” And he did. The cognac did its work and I don’t remember anything about the flight except

waking up at Sheremetyevo airport in Moscow. I walked out of the airport in my nightgown and slippers, just as they'd put me on the plane.

A taxi driver came up to me then and said, "Give me ten dollars and I'll take you to the metro." I answered, "Go to America yourself and try to make ten dollars!" When I got out of the airport, the first thing I felt was the protecting omophor of the Mother of God over Russia. I knelt down next to a puddle of dirty water and raising my arms, I cried out, "Mother of God, was it so necessary for me to go to America to see your omophor here?" The answer came like an order in broken Russian from someone behind me: "Get up and get on the bus, they'll take you for free." Incredibly, all the way home on the bus, the metro, and finally another bus, people kept paying for me without my even asking. I went without money.

When my sister opened the door she said, "...But you're in America." I said, "No, I'm in Russia." She said, "Well, here's some news for you. Your apartment was robbed yesterday." I replied, "Thank God; less trifles. I'm just happy that I'm free." "But how are you going to live? You left without saying anything to anyone. They won't take you back at the Commission." At that moment, a bird flew over and sat on the windowsill and I said, "Do you see that bird? God feeds her, He will feed me."

I went back to my workplace at the commission, and they looked me over and said, "We don't know what to do with you." I answered, "Then give me a pension and let me retire." Although it was too early to retire, they thought it over and gave me the pension anyway—six years before I was eligible. It was a miracle.

Around that same time, I heard a voice say, "What are you doing here? Buy a rucksack and start for the monastery." I felt this was from the Mother of God, so, I began traveling around from monastery to monastery, but I always returned home depressed, with a heavy heart. Afterwards I had a dream where I saw a monk come up to me and put his hand on my arm: "Don't be so nervous. In two years you will be in Optina."

I forgot that dream, but I finally did arrive at Optina, and the following day I went to visit Shamardino, the nearby women's monastery, where I saw a portrait of Elder Nikon, the last staretz of Optina. I cried out, "That was the monk who came to me in the dream!" I learned that Elder Nikon's last name was Belaev, as was mine before I married, and that his name in the world was Nikolai, like my father's. Later, I found out that we even shared the same namesday in the world.

For the first five years at Optina I cleaned the toilets and believed that all of the monks were angels, like in the books. ("How nice this is," I thought. "I'm serving angels.") I lived in the women's dormitory outside the monastery walls and ate in the workers' trapeza. My mother almost had heart failure when she found out that I, the former director of a high-ranking state educational commission, was cleaning toilets, and she began to cry and shout: "What are you doing? You were the best in your field—a bright, intelligent, cultured woman!" I said, "Mama, I wish I'd spent my whole previous life doing this. If I had, I wouldn't be so proud now." My mother replied, "At least America made you realize that you're proud."

After five years, I was asked to leave the monastery. I was shocked, and I asked God directly, "Is it You who are pushing me out of here, or is it the monks?" The answer was just as direct. Thanks to the blessing of Father Ilia of Optina, in a very short time I received not just a room, but this entire house (#1 on Lermontov Street, the closest house to the monastery). Father Ilia kept urging me to be tonsured, but I'd suffered so much that I didn't think I wanted to be a nun. When I finally agreed, they set the date for my tonsure in the Kazan Church. On that very day, two nuns happened to be visiting Optina from Alaska and St. Xenia's Skete near Platina, California—Abbess Brigid and Mother Thaisia. They didn't know me, but they were in the church for my tonsure, and I knew all about them. So, in a backward way, I got to St. Xenia's Skete and Father Seraphim's monastery after all. ✦