

Nikolai Arzhak

HANDS: a story

The author of this story—which first appeared in the Polish magazine Kultura published in Paris—is at present serving a five-year term at forced labor somewhere in the Soviet Union. He was recently sentenced together with another Russian writer, Abram Tertz.

“You, Serge, are an intellectual, and you’re polite, we all know that. That’s why you keep quiet and don’t ask any questions. But our boys from the factory, they ask right away. ‘Well, Vaska,’ they say, ‘so you got drunk till you got the shakes?’ They mean my hands. Don’t kid yourself, I saw how you looked at them and turned your head away. Even now, you’re still looking at me so as not to see my hands. Don’t worry, brother, I understand—you do this to spare my feelings, so I don’t feel embarrassed and ashamed. Well, look, look all you want. It’s all the same to me. I won’t get offended. After all, it’s a sight you don’t see every day. Only it’s not from drink.

“I drink now and then, when the right company turns up, or when there’s something to celebrate, like with you now. We can’t very well not drink to our meeting. I remember it all, brother. How you and I kept a secret together, and how you jabbered in French with that White-guardist, and how we took Yaroslav . . . Remember how you spoke at that meeting and grabbed me by the hand, I just happened to be near you, and said: ‘With these very hands,’ you said. Ye-e-es . . . Fill it up, Seryozha, fill it up. Or else I’ll really go to pieces.

“I quite forget what the medics call the shakes in their lingo. Doesn’t matter, anyway, I got it all written up, I’ll show you later. But you understand why it happened to me? Well, it was sort of an accident. When we got demobilized in 1921, the year we won, I returned right away to my native factory, if you’ll pardon the phrase. For me there were honors and respect. I was, after all, a revolutionary hero, and, on the other hand, don’t you forget, a Party member, a politically-conscious worker. It happened now and then, to be sure, that I had to set things straight for somebody or other. We had all kinds of volun-

teers for conversations. 'Look,' one of them would say, 'you people won and now you're the bosses. And there's no bread around, nor horse radish . . .' Well, I soon cut that kind of talk short. I was a hard one. You couldn't throw sand in my eyes with that kind of Menshevik crap. Yes! Fill yours up now, don't wait for me!

"I worked barely a year at that factory, no more, and—boom—they call me to the Regional Committee. 'Well now,' they say, 'this and that, here's your assignment, Malinin. The Party,' they say, 'is mobilizing you, Malinin, Vassili Semyonovich, into the heroic ranks of the Cheka, the Extraordinary Committee to Fight the Counterrevolution. We wish you,' they say, 'great success in the struggle against the world bourgeoisie and, should you happen to see Comrade Dzerzhinsky,* give him our humble regards.' So, what do I do? I am a Party man. 'Yes, Sir,' I say, 'I will carry out my assignment, the order of the Party.' I grabbed the assignment, dropped into the factory to say goodbye to the boys and was on my way. I go, and in my daydreams I see myself catching all the counterrevolutionaries, one by one, and stop them from mucking up our young Soviet Power. So, I got there.

"I really did see Felix Edmundovich; I told him our Regional Committee sent him their greetings. He gripped my hand, thanked me, and then took us all—there were about thirty of us boys, all mobilized by the Party—and made us stand in a row and told us, 'you can't build a house on a swamp, you must first dry it, and while you dry it you must kill all kinds of toads and reptiles; that's an iron necessity,' he said. 'And to this task,' he said, 'we must all put our hands . . .' I mean he told it to us like a story, like an anecdote, everything was natural and clear. Only he looked so severe, didn't even smile. Then they started assigning us. 'Who are you, where are you from and what do you do?' they ask. 'And what's your education?' they say. And my education, you know it yourself, one war with the Krauts, another with the Whites, and then slaving behind a machine, that's my education for you. Sure, I went for a couple of years to the parochial school by the village church. So they assigned me to the Special Service Section or, to put it in ordinary language, they made me carry out executions.

"I can't say the work was hard—but you couldn't call it easy either. It touches the heart, if I may say so. At the front, you know it yourself, it's a different story: either you get him or he gets you. But here . . . Well, sure, I got used to it. You walk behind him through the yard

* Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky was the first head of the Cheka, the forerunner of the GPU, set up by the Bolshevik regime during its early years for purposes of "internal security."

and think to yourself, try to explain it to yourself. 'You must, Vassili, you must. It is ne-ce-ssary. If you don't finish him off, he, that reptile, will overturn the entire Soviet Republic.' I got used to it. I drank while I was doing it, of course, you can't do it without drinks.

"They gave us alcohol. But all these stories about special rations, that we Chekists were fed with chocolate and white rolls, that's all bourgeois lies; we had ordinary soldiers' rations, if you wish: bread, buck-wheat and fish. But alcohol they did give us, that's true. So that's how it went! I worked at it for seven months, and then this accident happened. We were ordered to liquidate a bunch of priests. For doing counterrevolutionary propaganda. For malicious tricks. For throwing confusion into the minds of their parishioners. Something to do with that Patriarch, Tikhon. Or something against socialism generally. In a word—enemies.

"There were twelve of them. Our commandant gave the orders: 'You,' he said, 'Malinin, take three; you, Vlasenko, you Golovchiner, and you . . .' I forgot what they called the fourth one. He was a Latvian, had a funny name, nothing like ours. The Latvian and Golovchiner went first. And we had this set-up: the guardroom, you see, was in the middle. On the one side of it was the room where they kept those who were to be shot, and on the other was the yard. We took them one by one. You finish one off in the yard, and then the boys help you to drag him off to the side and you come back for the next one. You had to drag them off or else it could happen that you come in with the next one and he would start twisting and try to get away from you—all that bother and extra work. In any case, it's better when they don't cry.

"Well then, Golovchiner and the Latvian finished off theirs, and it was my turn. And I had prepared myself by downing a few. And it's not because I was afraid or that I had some kind of weakness for religion. Nothing like it, I'm a hard man, a Party man, I don't believe in any gods, angels or archangels—and yet I began to feel faint. A man like Golovchiner, he had it easy, he was a Jew after all, and they, so they tell me, I don't know if it's true, don't even have holy icons—and here I sit and drink and all kinds of nonsense gets into my head, how my late mother took me to the village church and how I kissed the hand of our village priest, Father Vassili, and he—he was an old man—called me his namesake all the time . . . Ye-es . . . So, I finally went, I mean for the first, and took him out. I came back, had another shot, then took the second one out. I come back, down another one, and some-

thing gets hold of me. 'Wait,' I say, 'wait, boys, I'll be back in a moment.'

"I put my Mauser on the table and go out. I'll put my fingers in my mouth, I'll throw up, and then I can wash and get myself in proper shape again. Well then, I went out, did everything necessary—but—I didn't feel any better. So, what the hell, I thought, the devil take you, you son-of-a-bitch, I'll finish you off in a moment and then—sleep. I grabbed my Mauser and went for the third one. And that third one, he was still young, a handsome priest boy he was. I lead him through the corridor, I see him lifting the long folds of his robe over the threshold, and I begin to feel sick, I don't understand what's going on. We get out into the yard. The priest jerks his beard up, looks to the sky. 'March,' I tell him, 'march, Father, and don't look back! You prayed for paradise and you'll soon get there!'

"Well. I was just joking, to keep my spirits up. I never did anything like that in my life before, starting conversation with a condemned man. I let him go three steps forward, that's the proper way, put the barrel of my gun between his shoulder blades and let him have it. Well, you know how a Mauser shoots—like a cannon! And it packs such a wallop, it almost tore my arm from my shoulder. And then, you see, I look and this priest that I shot turns around and starts walking towards me. Naturally, you don't always finish them off the first time: some fall right away, like a sack, others turn and twist, like a top, and some walk and roll like drunks. But this one walks straight towards me with his little steps, and floats in his robe as if I had never shot him. 'Now, you son-of- . . .' I say, 'now, Father, halt!' And I stick my gun again into him, into his chest this time. And he tears his robe over his chest and lays it all bare and, brother, he had a hairy, curly chest, comes towards me and yells at the top of his voice: 'Shoot' he says, 'Shoot me, you Anti-Christ! Murder me, your Christ!'

"I lost my head altogether, and let him have it again and again. But he still walks towards me, as if nothing had happened! And there is no wound on him, no blood, he walks and prays: 'Oh Lord, You have stopped a bullet aimed by evil hands! I accept my punishment for Your sake! No one can murder a living soul!' And then more of this sort. . . . I don't remember whether I emptied my whole magazine into him; but one thing I knew for sure: I couldn't have missed him, I let him have it at only two paces. But there he stands before me, his eyes aflame like a wolf's, his chest bared, and something like a halo shines over his head—it occurred to me later that he was standing with his head against the

sun, it was just about to set. 'Your hands,' he yelled at me, 'your hands are covered with blood! Look at your hands!'

"I throw the Mauser on the ground and run to the guardroom, I knock someone down in the doorway, and get into the room. I grab a rifle from the stand and shout: 'Lead me,' I shout, 'lead me to Dzerzhinsky, or I'll pepper you all with this!'

"Well, they take the rifle from me, lead me out in a quick march. I go into the office, I tear myself loose from the comrades and say, shaking and stammering: 'Shoot me!' I say, 'Shoot me, Felix Edmundovich, but I can't kill that priest!' I say this and fall on the floor like a log, I don't remember anything more.

"I came to in a hospital. 'Nervous shock,' the doctors say. They cared for me, to tell the truth, well and lovingly. And the nursing and the cleanliness, and the food, good food for those days, light food you might say. They cured everything, except for one thing: my hands—you can see it yourself—still shake. The nervous shock, it seems, passed into my hands. They discharged me from the Cheka, of course. That's not the kind of hands they need there. And you can't go back to the machine with them, that's for sure. So they assigned me to the factory stores.

"Well, I work my share there and make myself useful. Of course, there is all kinds of paperwork, writing freight bills and all that. Because of my hands I don't do this myself. . . . A girl was sent to help me out with this, quite a clever girl she is. And that's my life, brother. And as for the priest, I found out later just what was behind all that. It had nothing to do with God, or anything like that. Simply, when I went out into the yard, to pull myself together, our boys took the magazine out of my Mauser and put another one in—with blind cartridges. They played me a joke, sort of. Well, I'm not angry at them—they were young, after all, and their life wasn't any too sweet, so they thought up this trick. No, I don't bear them any grudge. It is only my hands . . . they're no use for any kind of work . . ."