

## The Bandursty

*(story was told in Dayton, Ohio at a workshop probably before 2000 by Ed Hays)*

*During the oppressive days of Joseph Stalin's dictatorial rule of the Soviet Union, countless acts of brutality and imprisonment were committed. In the mid-1930's Stalin ordered a Congress of Folk Music. Since time immemorial, a group of blind folk singers and story-tellers had wandered up and down the roads of the Ukraine. The great Russian composer, Shostakovich, called them "a living museum, the country's living history." These blind folk-singers were called "the Banduristy," and Stalin gathered several hundred of them from the remote, tiny villages of Russia. When they were all together, he ordered them shot to death! Within one day, he had erased a timeless culture with its priceless songs, poetry, legends and stories. Around such a terrible event, naturally, there are countless stories; this one takes place on the evening of that tragic day itself.*

The captain's green army uniform was still neat and clean, even though the day had been long and dirty. Darkness now surrounded the tiny peasant's hut that had been recently commandeered as headquarters. The officer sat at a small wooden table; across from him sat another man. On the table was a flickering oil lamp that cast strange shadows upon the rough log walls of the cabin. Also on the table was a half-empty bottle of vodka, a tin cup, an official looking letter and a large, black army revolver.

The captain's dark brown hair, while cut short, was still visible beneath his military cap. The old man who sat across from him was white-bearded and dressed in coarse peasant's clothing. After a long period of silence the officer spoke, "You understand, comrade, that what happened out there today was ordered by Generalissimo Stalin." As he spoke, he held up the official

document, and then slowly set it back on the table. "Would you care for some vodka?"

The old man said nothing; his silence hammered on the walls of the hut. The officer took a drink from the tin cup, lit a cigarette and then blew a white umbrella of smoke upward into the dark shadows of the timbered ceiling. Once again he spoke, "Comrade, you may wonder why you were not executed with those others. It is almost night and my men are tired, that's true. But the real reason I told them that I would, myself, complete the order and dismissed them. When we finish our brief conversation, it will be necessary for me to complete my mission, but I am curious - why do you think that I did not have you killed with the other folk-singers?"

Again the old man made no response. "I know you are blind, old man; are you deaf as well?" asked he captain, his voice rimmed with impatience. "Don't you realize that I have the power of life and death over you?"

"You're a young man, aren't you, sir?" replied the folk-singer. His voice was clear, its sound was like silver bells hanging from the harnesses of horses that pull the sleights in winter. "I would doubt that you are more than twenty-five years old - so young to shoulder so much shame and guilt."

"What shame, what guilt?" snapped the officer. "As a captain in the Soviet Army, comrade, it is often necessary to kill in times of peace as well as war."

"Necessary, sir," questioned the old man, "to kill harmless, blind singers so that progress is not hindered by memories of the past?"

“A good officer, comrade, does not question his orders. If our revolution is to succeed, all orders must be obeyed without question. How else can the liberation of the masses be achieved?” “Ah, liberation,” the old folk-singer returned quietly as if speaking to the wind. “Liberation, freedom, equality of the peoples, a classless society - all hollow words. Are we - are you - in possession of more freedom today than when we lived under the Czar? Are you, my young captain, free NOT to kill me?”

“Enough!” shouted the officer as he smashed his fist to the table. The oil lamp jumped from the force of his blow, causing the strange shadows to suddenly dance crazily upon the walls. “I should shoot you this very moment for such traitorous words about the revolution. If those other, your fellow banduristy, thought as you do, then they were rightly executed as traitors.”

“My friends,” said the old man, “were shot, sir, not for treason but rather because of what they saw.”

“Don’t be stupid, comrade,” said the captain, “they were blind; they saw nothing.” “You are wrong, my young friend,” said the old man, his sightless eyes penetrating the space where the captain sat. “These men saw what eyes cannot see. That’s why they were so dangerous to Stalin. We who are blind have other gifts. We know the art of listening, and sound is a prime source of knowledge. The energy of our senses works not in competition but in harmony. Our sense of rhythm and touch is greater than that of others, and perhaps that is why so many of us are singers and musicians. Most of the sense energy that our eyes would normally use can be channeled to the ears, to the fingers or the nose. We SEE sir, with our other senses. For example, at this moment, I smell fear. You, captain, are afraid!” Reaching across the small table, the folk-singer gently touched the face of the young army captain, who did not move to push away the old man’s hand but sat rigid in his chair.

“Ah, yes, as I thought,” the old folk-singer said, “you are a young man - and I sense that you are beautiful as well. Beauty is of the heart, while handsomeness is only on the surface. The world loves the handsome and the pretty, but real beauty is seen only when the eyes are closed. We banduristy are being killed because we see inside of things; we see too much. As a result, surface tricks cannot fool us. Progress, liberation and the freedom of the masses - these are all blind words for those who cannot really see.”

The old man paused for a moment; then he began again in a quiet tone, “I suspect that I have opened a small door in your heart where memories have begun to escape. You did not kill me, captain, because I remind you of a certain banduristy who once lived near your home village. He taught you to see beauty, encouraged your poetry, enchanted you with his songs and stories. He taught you that real beauty is beneath the surface and that God and magic are still alive! Today, alternating with the rifle shots of the firing squad, you began to hear again those folk songs, and once again you were alive.”

“Yes,” came the tormented voice of the youthful captain as he gently pushed away the banduristy’s hand, “yes, you are correct. You remind me of a man I loved more than my own father - the blind folksinger of our tiny village. But I am confused; I need time to think, to see what I must do.”

“If you wish to see,” said the old man, “then blow out the lamp or close your eyes, my young friend. From sight comes the knowledge of facts, but from insight comes wisdom. And insight comes from what you sense as you make your cautious way in the dark along the inner paths of your heart. Close your eyes - feel your way - and then the inner transformation will begin.”

The officer leaned forward and blew out the lamp; then he leaned back and closed his eyes. Once again, after many years, the young man remembered the stories and heard the folk songs. He found himself standing in the crowded village church. Great white clouds of incense rose up, out of which appeared the noble faces of the holy ones pictured in the golden icons which glistened in the flickering lights of hundreds of candles. The ancient hymns of the choir rose and fell, a harmony of voices and bells like some eternal earthquake that seemed to swell from the soul of all humanity. Lost in the embrace of his thoughts, he was unaware that old man was softly singing the ancient Easter hymn, alleluia, Christ is Rise, “The old man is right,” thought the captain, “I did love that old folk singer. I loved the smell and feel of those days, so rich in dreams and ideals. Today, my head is that of a Communist, but my soul - my soul is Russian.

With a resounding crash, the night wind blew open the door, banging it loudly against the wall. Through the open doorway, the night wind, smelling of moist spring rain and of fresh death, rushed into the darkened cabin. The captain opened his eyes. His right hand touched the revolver that lay on the table. He remembered now who he was, and he remembered his orders and the revolution — and he was sick with sadness. He did not move to close the door but sat with his hand resting on the revolver. By the light of the spring full moon, he could see that the old man was serenely smiling.

“Aren’t you afraid to die?” asked the captain.

“My young friend, when you begin to see, then you learn that death only happens outside and never within you,” replied the old singer. “No, I am not afraid to die, nor am I afraid of Stalin or of all the Stalins of history. You can kill the story-tellers, but you cannot kill the story! Others will rise up and take our places. Indeed we need liberty and freedom, but we also need poetry,

stories and the liberation of the heart. No, I am not afraid, but you, my young friend, you are afraid. Do not be . . .

With that the banduristy rose and began to walk toward the captain. The young man jumped to his feet, picking up the revolver from the table. As they met, the old man warmly embraced the officer, kissing him on the cheek, and he softly began to sing an ancient lullaby: "Do not be fearful, fear not the darkness." The officer struggled to free himself of the embrace of the singer, an embrace that threatened to steal away his sense of reason and his sense of duty. Then suddenly the night air exploded with two gun shots. The smells of gunpowder and blood mingled with the dark aroma of that spring night. For minutes they stood still embracing one another; then with a thud the revolver fell to the floor. Slowly one of them lowered the other to the floor and then slumped into the chair, his head sunk into his hands. The muffled sounds of weeping were wedded to the murmur of the night wind.

At sunrise, a battered old army truck came rattling up the road from the village. A sergeant and two youthful recruits who had arrived that very night came to pick up the captain.

The sergeant, an older man with the face of a peasant, red and rough from years spent out of doors in the Russian winters, paused for a moment as he stepped down from the truck. The wind was blowing through the tall cedar trees that bordered the field where the day before he and the other soldiers had planted over three hundred banduristy in the dark soil of Mother Russia. The wind mourned and wailed as it swept across the freshly dug earth and through the tall green cedars. The two young recruits walked behind the sergeant, their gaze riveted on the field with its freshly turned earth. The sergeant stopped as he came to the doorway of the cabin. Caught by the wind the door creaked vacantly. There, in a bright yellow square of sunlight, he first

caught sight of the boots — black, polished, military boots — then he saw the green army uniform. The body was face down; the head lay beneath the table. Beside the body was the great, black revolver, an iron island in a pool of blood that had trickled beneath the body.

The old sergeant shook his head and picked up the piece of paper from the table. On the bottom of the military order which was signed with the initials of the captain there was the notation, “Mission completed — the singers have been silenced . . . but not the song.”

Placing the paper in the pocket of his tunic, the sergeant said to the two recruits, “Pick him up and give him a decent burial — out there, next to the folksingers, then walk back to the village. I will go and see what I can do to explain this to the commander.”

He turned and briskly walked toward the old, battered truck. As he did he thought to himself, “I was afraid this would happen. He was too young to supervise such a slaughter.” The sergeant paused before getting into the truck, turning his head to listen. He thought he had heard something, but perhaps it was only the wind in the cedar trees playing tricks on him. He was certain that he had heard, even if faintly, the sound of a folk song being sung somewhere off in the distance, perhaps across the river in the forest. Shaking his head, he climbed into the truck saying to himself, “I must be careful, or I’ll be the next one to go.” With a loud grinding noise, the old truck’s engine came alive.

One of the youthful recruits, a mere lad of fifteen or sixteen, ran to the door of the cabin and called out to his superior. The sergeant, not waiting to listen, thrust his head out the window of the truck and shouted, “I said bury him; that’s an order!” and with that he drove down the road toward the village.

The young soldier stepped back into the cabin and said, "I just thought he should know. I think it is very unusual."

I too, comrade, replied his companion. "Never before have I seen an officer in the Soviet Army with a white beard and of such ancient age."

*-re-told as best remembered by Kate 'Carney' Dailey for September 1, 2019*