

A Small Thing to Carry

‘Will you take this photograph with you to Vasily’s headstone, my dear? I wouldn’t ask, but it’s only a small thing to carry.’

Almost every journey starts with some kind of promise, and I’m here to keep the one I’ve made to my grandmother’s oldest friend.

The sun is high, and a soft haze shimmers above the streets that snake up Bratislava’s highest hill to the Slavin Memorial. I first glimpsed this formidable Stalinist obelisk from the old town below. It was obscured by trees and too distant to make out clearly, but I know from my guidebook that it is topped by a Russian soldier trampling the Nazi flag underfoot.

When Kristina heard that I’d be visiting Slovakia on my European trip, she asked if I would find her brother’s grave in the military cemetery beneath this imposing monument. It was built to commemorate the lives of some 7,000 Soviet soldiers who died here in 1945 when the city was liberated. There are nearly 300 marked graves, and I walk slowly along each identical row, searching for the name that matches the Cyrillic lettering on the card that Kristina has written out for me. And then I see it: Vasily Ivankov.

A framed photograph of a soldier is propped up against the neighbouring headstone. He is lath-thin and achingly handsome, and though he stands proud, there is a gentleness about him. I know that it’s unlikely, yet I can’t help hoping that he and Vasily shared tobacco and dreams of home as they fought side by side to free Bratislava.

I hear footsteps approach, and a man kneels at the next grave as if in prayer, and places a bunch of wildflowers on the plinth. The cemetery is almost deserted, and we nod and smile in recognition of the coincidence. Timur introduces himself, repeating ‘dedushka’ - grandfather - as he points at the headstone. I suggest to him that the two soldiers may have been friends, but his accent is so thick that I’m unsure of his answer.

Timur sees that I’m struggling to understand, and holds up his hand as he searches his rucksack. He produces a card, typed in English on one side and German on the other. The translation is a little rough, but the basic story is clear. Timur is selling Soviet memorabilia to help fund his journey around Eastern Europe,

visiting the places that have played a part in his family's history. His father is gravely ill, and anxious to entrust his son with these important stories before they are forgotten. As I read, he nods encouragement, and spreads out a motley collection of bric-a-brac on his grandfather's headstone. There's nothing I want, but it's hard to refuse a man who has shared his story; a man whose family may be linked with Kristina's.

When I hesitate, he reaches in his pocket for something else, and presses a metal cross into my palm, fashioned from patterned tin. 'Dedushka,' he says again, pointing at the grave. 'You have.' For a moment I am overwhelmed, and then I respond in the only way I can, by handing him Kristina's photograph of her brother. 'For you,' I say. He looks momentarily puzzled, then smiles, nodding and thanking me as he retrieves his merchandise. He appears embarrassed, and suddenly anxious to leave, giving me a quick wave as he strides away and disappears behind the obelisk.

I sit down on a nearby bench, and run my finger down the length of the cross, as though the pattern is a form of braille that will reveal the final story of Vasily, and of Timur's grandfather, and help me understand what these young soldiers saw and felt as they fought for the freedom of a foreign city.

This hilltop is renowned as a romantic place to watch the celebrated sunsets. Yet I wonder if the young Slovak couples who come here now still ponder the significance of this towering declaration of Russian victory; a sentinel standing guard over Bratislava, casting a heavy shadow where there was once a church spire.

When I stand up again, I see Timur behind me. I almost wave, when I see he has stopped alongside another grave, where an elderly woman is lighting a candle at the foot of the headstone. I see him talking to her as he opens his rucksack. She nods in reply and selects a tin cross. I smile ruefully, and close my fingers around its replica in my pocket.

Have I been deceived, or have I misunderstood? Have I translated his words and gestures into the story I want to hear? Oddly, it doesn't seem to matter either way. The cross is a small thing to carry, and perversely I know I will treasure it anyway.