



The Underground Millionaires

6 February 1965 – Moscow

In Russia, it is important not to make mistakes. Your life depends on it.

Vitali Solznetzn remembered Dostoevsky's caution: "There are secrets you tell your best friend, secrets you keep to yourself, and there are secrets that you won't even tell yourself." Solznetzn had prepared for this day, yet he kept thinking there was something he had left undone, something he had forgotten.

The trial was finally nearing an end. With each long day of testimony, the Moscow Criminal Court room had gone from crowded to overflowing with onlookers, members of the press, the watchful eyes of the KGB, Communist Party officials, and a few hopeful friends and relatives of the two men. They had all come to see and take measure of the two Jews, Vitali and

Lazar Solznetzn, who were accused of high crimes against the State. Crimes that could send the brothers to hard labor camps in Siberia or the death penalty.

Lazar was the older brother. His once black hair was now streaked with gray, but he was still strikingly handsome. He wore a pinstriped London made Saville Row suit, a Turnbull and Asser tie, *the King of England's tie*, he told himself, and shiny gold cufflinks. Lazar sat straight in the hard wooden chair, his shoulders back and chin up. He hated *these communist bastards*, and he knew the trial was nothing more than propaganda for Russian and foreign consumption. But more than that, Lazar was a realist, and he feared his fate was already sealed.

Vitali was in his late forties but appeared younger. He wore a simple black suit with the left sleeve pinned where his arm had once been. The arm had been amputated just below his shoulder, shattered and destroyed in the early days of the Germans attack on Leningrad. Vitali looked about the court room and viewed the spectators, one by one, searching for a familiar face, *a friend somewhere*, he thought.

Moskovskaya Pravda and other Russian newspapers had reported the daily revelations of the trial, which had also been covered by the international press. *Moskovskaya Pravda* had described the two men as,

“The Solznetzn brothers, underground businessmen, have made millions of illegal rubles through their clandestine enterprise, “Paris Nights”. The brothers have achieved great wealth at the expense of the Russian people. Prosecuting officers for the State have left little doubt as to the guilt of Lazar and Vitali Solznetzn.”

The walls of the old courtroom had long turned from

fresh white to fading and pale yellow. A high-ceilinged room, monotonous and bleak except for the red flag of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, with its hammer and sickle, hung on the wall behind the table where three judges sat in black robes. Large portraits of Vladimir Lenin and Premier Leonid Brezhnev hung on opposite sides. An ivory vase with red carnations had been placed in the center of the judges' bench. It was a futile attempt to bring some life to the room. Spectators stood with their backs to the walls and State guards in gray uniforms manned the entrance to the room. Vitali's head jerked up when the chief judge banged his gavel. The judge looked at his notes and peered over his eye glasses.

“Comrade Counselor Pavlevski, do you have any further witnesses?”

Pavlevski, the attorney for the accused, who was attired in the customary black suit of his profession, straightened his coat, stood, and addressed the court.

“Yes, your honor, we have one more witness. We call General Yuri Karpov of State Security as a witness for Vitali Solznetzn.”

Heads turned. “Did he say General Karpov was State Security?”

The spectators strained to see General Karpov as he entered the room and approached the witness stand. It was unprecedented that a senior KGB officer was testifying in a trial of this nature. Karpov had been honored as a *Hero of the Soviet Union*, and his uniform was adorned with an array of military ribbons and medals.

General Karpov strode purposefully to the front of the courtroom. He paused briefly and looked at Vitali Solznetzn,

punctuating the silence, then turned from the witness chair and squarely faced the three judges.

The Chief Judge spoke solemnly.

“General Karpov, you are aware that this is a criminal case involving allegations of high crimes against the State by the accused Lazar Solznetzn and Vitali Solznetzn. If they are found guilty, they may be imprisoned or given the death penalty. Are we to understand, General, that you are to be a witness for the accused in this proceeding?”

General Karpov was equally direct in his response.

“Yes, Comrade Chief Justice, I fully understand the State’s charges against Vitali Solznetzn. I’ve known Vitali Solznetzn for nearly thirty years. We were together in Leningrad during the 900 days - the siege - and I was with him when he lost his arm and nearly lost his life. I’m here to testify to his patriotism, his loyalty to the State, and to his high personal character.”

Vitali Solznetzn moved noticeably in his seat, his emotions jolted by memories long repressed by time and distance. He studied Yuri Karpov’s face. He was beginning to show battle lines and creases, but he was still supremely confident and formidable after all these years. His hair was not as full as it once was, and there were touches of gray around his temples. Yuri Karpov had never been a heavy man by Russian standards, but Vitali noticed the extra kilos that his old friend now carried around his waist.

As Yuri Karpov began to speak, Vitali remembered the Leningrad night when they first met nearly thirty years ago. His memory was still as crisp and clear as that cold fall evening had been.