

A Threat of Cherry Blossoms

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Ephesians 1:15-23

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How does one reckon the account of a life when the columns refuse to add up? The answer is obvious. You can't. But what do you do if that life belongs to your own grandparents? And what do you do when you look in the mirror and see their features looking back at you?

Alex Halberstadt was a successful writer whose articles appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*. He was twice nominated for a James Beard Award and received fellowships to some of America's most prestigious writing programs. He was also an emigrant from the former Soviet Union, who's life in the United States was haunted by an enigmatic figure, his paternal grandfather. *

Families keep secrets. Sometimes they keep secrets out of habit. Sometimes out of love. Sometimes out of fear. Families not only keep secrets from outsiders, sometimes they keep secrets even from themselves.

Alex wanted to understand why in his family secrecy surrounded his grandfather. He had a photograph of his grandfather, a handsome elderly man, sitting on a park bench in short sleeves with a jaunty summer hat on his head, his arm draped around the shoulders of his second wife. Alex had only vague memories of this old man, who remained behind in Russia when others in the family came to America. His family seemed to bear wounds from generation to generation, a trail of broken relationships, unfulfilled longings, regrets, guilt, shame which defied explanation. So Alex returned to the former Soviet Union, to Moscow, and to the city where his grandfather lived in retirement seeking the missing pieces of a family puzzle.

What Alex discovered was that his grandfather had been one of Joseph Stalin's last bodyguards. Not only was he in the innermost circle in a totalitarian state where paranoia and fear and cruelty overlapped to such a degree that no one ever knew where they stood. His grandfather also was an interrogator, a torturer, and a murderer, who survived and profited by making himself indispensable to a monster.

Alex tells the story, setting into context his grandfather's career. In those years, when his grandfather served Stalin, monthly quotas were set by the Kremlin of "enemies of the people." Local agents of the Soviet security forces were required to make up to sixty arrests a day. And the local populations helped. Neighbors, friends, and family lined up daily outside the offices of security forces to denounce their friends, their husbands, wives, children and colleagues. As Alex says, "In its rejection of personal experience and common sense, the Soviet mentality of those years resembled mass psychosis."

Ultimately Alex learned what such political oppression could do to pervert a human being who, like his grandfather, found his vocation in cruelty. Callouses and time grew over the

tender skin of conscience. Unspeakable acts were justified casually. A utopian dream was twisted to fit the paranoia and ego of a tyrant. Common morality, even decency, became malleable enough to suit whatever lies Stalin told one day, knowing he was likely to tell new lies the next day. Alex discovered a whole civilization corrupted by the delusion that the possession of power, control, and force justifies any and all evils.

What does the story of Alex and his grandfather have to do with Ephesians? What does this story have to do with us?

Let's start with us.

Most of us have been so fortunate to have lived in a country, the democratic values of which and the democratic institutions of which, have provided a sense of safety and security unrivaled in history. Even when our nation has failed, within itself it holds values that rise up to critique and (we hope) correct our failures. The specters of fear that stalked the men and women of the Soviet Union in the time of Stalin are foreign to most of us. By and large we have enjoyed the freedom to cultivate the common good, if we will take the effort. That's us.

Our musings about the nature of power usually take place in books by philosophers and reflections of statesmen. Even when someone writes or speaks on the subject of brutal political power, the sort exemplified by Machiavelli or someone like him for whom, "*might makes right*," we feel relatively safe in considering these ideas. Yes, we agree, there are wolves peering from the edges of the dark forest surrounding us. The wolves would gladly devour us and even our young if it would mean that they could rule the forest. But we sit close to the fire, warming ourselves with the certainty that the fire will keep them at bay. We know the wolves have no respect for any kind of power except the power to threaten, to cause suffering and death, to coerce and demand submission. And sometimes we are tempted to think the wolves are right. That's us too.

But in the time of St. Paul, in the time when he wrote his letter to the Ephesians, there were no guardrails on society, no enduring democratic institutions, the last republic of the ancient world had fallen when Caesar Augustus triumphed over his political enemies. Then his adopted son, Tiberius, sat on the throne. And even his allies were terrified of his avarice, perversity and cruelty. These names figure into the biblical story, as we know. And after Tiberius would come another and another and another ruler whose capricious and self-indulgent dominion was enforced at the point of a sword, whose only conception of power was control by the threat of death and the threat of pain. St. Paul himself would be slain by such a ruler, the Emperor Nero.

Cruelty had become a national pastime, a sport, an entertainment. Human life was cheap in Imperial Rome. And no one seriously believed that power and strength meant anything but the ability to coerce and subdue, to bend others to your own will, or simply to destroy them.

Well. Almost no one.

Into that world St. Paul and these odd followers of Jesus of Nazareth stepped with the conviction that God is love, and that God has revealed how far he will go for the sake of love by taking human form and suffering shame, rejection, and death on a cross without seeking retribution.

Into that world St. Paul stepped and told the followers of Jesus in Ephesus that the crucified Jesus has been raised above all earthly powers, all dominions, all kings, empires and principalities, and that this Jesus, still bearing in his flesh the scars that will never heal, is the embodiment of the power of God, the Creator Almighty.

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There has never been a moment more timely than now in our country to hear this gospel which St. Paul preached and, tragically, that so many Christians have either forgotten or rejected. Let's listen again to what the apostle says:

'For this reason, ever since I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the age to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.'

So much is at stake. That's why Paul preached a gospel that was sure to infuriate an Emperor. He said, in essence, that the power to inflict death and suffering cannot intimidate those who know the secret of God's power. The sort of power worshiped in this world can only hurt and kill. That's all it can do. Then it is spent. God's power, overflowing eternal love, creates, heals, raises the dead, and vetoes the false gods of this present age.

And here's the thing that this text tells us: While the powers of this age inevitably will contort and twist generation after generation leaving only brokenness in its wake; the power of God creates a community that is the Body of Christ, bearing God's Spirit, incarnating God's love, healing broken humanity and rising to a new creation.

And, are you ready for this? You are that community.

Alex Halberstadt, in the prologue to the book about his grandfather, tells a story of a research project that was carried out at Emory University in Atlanta. The researchers released the scent of cherry blossoms in a cage of baby mice. And each time the scent of cherry blossoms arrived, the researchers administered a painful electric shock to the mice. They did this over and over

again. You can predict what happened. Eventually the mice so associated the sweet aroma of cherry blossoms with pain that they began to tremble with fear whenever they smelled it.

The surprising finding of the experiment came later, when that first generation of mice had babies of their own. And, although these baby mice had never been shocked when they smelled cherry blossoms, nevertheless, they too trembled when exposed to the scent of cherry blossoms.

The researchers thought that they must have inadvertently made some mistake in the research protocol. So they insured that the next generation of mice were brought up in a lab on the other side of the Emory campus, where they would have no connection at all with their parents and grandparents. But when these grand-baby mice were born, the researchers were shocked to discover that these little mice also trembled with fear at the scent of cherry blossoms.

I can't pretend to understand the mystery of good and evil in this world. But I am sure that when St. Paul says that we are dealing not with flesh and blood, but with powers and principalities, with spiritual evil in high places, he isn't just waxing eloquent. And when he speaks of the love of God indwelling our hearts and shaping our response to the world around us, he isn't being sentimental. He is placing before us a solemn and a sacred reality. The legacy we leave and the impact our lives will have on generations unborn depend upon what power we live by.

Amen

*Alex Halberstadt, "Young Heroes of the Soviet Union: A Memoir and a Reckoning," (New York, 2020).