

INSPECTOR PEKKALA by Sam Eastland

Book Two Preview: THE RED COFFIN

As the motorcycle crested the hill, sunlight winked off the goggles of the rider. Against the chill of early spring, he wore a double-breasted leather coat and a leather flying cap which buckled under his chin.

He had been on the road for three days, stopping only to buy fuel along the way. His saddlebags were filled with tins of food he'd brought from home.

At night, he did not stay in any town, but wheeled his motorcycle in amongst the trees. It was a new machine, a Zundapp K500, with a pressed steel frame and girder forks. Normally he could never have afforded it, but this trip alone would pay for everything, and more besides. He thought about that as he sat there alone in the woods, eating cold soup from a can.

Before camouflaging the motorcycle with fallen branches, he wiped the dust from its sprung leather seat and the large teardrop-shaped fuel tank. He spat on every scratch he found and rubbed them with his sleeve.

The man slept on the ground, wrapped in an oil cloth sheet, without the comfort of a fire or even a cigarette. The smell of smoke might have given away his location, and he could not afford to take the risk.

Sometimes, he was woken by the rumble of Polish army trucks passing by on the road. None of them stopped. Once he heard a crashing in among the trees. He drew a revolver from his coat and sat up, just as a stag passed a few paces away, barely visible, as if the shadows themselves had come to life. For the rest of the night, the man did not sleep. Tormented by childhood nightmares of human shapes with antlers sprouting from their heads, he wanted only to be gone from this country. Ever since he crossed the German border into Poland, he had been afraid, although no one who saw him would ever have realized it. This was not the first time he had been on such a journey, and the man knew from experience that his fear would not leave him until he was back among his own people again.

On the third day, he crossed into the Soviet Union at a lonely border check point manned by one Polish soldier and one Russian soldier, neither of whom could speak each other's language. Both men came out to admire his motorcycle. "Zundapp," they crooned softly, as if saying the name of a loved one and the man gritted his teeth while they ran their hands over the chrome.

A few minutes after leaving the checkpoint, he pulled over to the side of the road and raised the goggles to his forehead, revealing two pale moons of skin where the road dust had not settled on his face. Shielding his eyes with one hand, he looked out over the rolling countryside. The fields were ploughed and muddy, seeds of rye and barley still sleeping in the ground. Thin feathers of smoke rose from the chimneys of solitary farm houses, their slate roofs patched with luminous green moss.

The man wondered what the inhabitants of those houses might do if they knew their way of life would soon ending. Even if they did know, he told himself, they would probably just carry on as they had always done, placing their faith in miracles. That, he thought, is precisely why they deserve to be extinct. The task he had come here to accomplish would bring that moment closer. After today, there would be nothing they could do to stop it. Then he wiped the fingerprints of the border guards off his handlebars and continued on his way.

He was close to the rendezvous point, racing along deserted roads, through patches of mist which clung to the hollows like ink diffusing in water. The words of half remembered songs escaped his lips. Otherwise he did not speak, as if he were alone upon the earth. Driving out across that empty countryside, that was how he felt himself to be.

At last he came to the place he had been looking for. It was an abandoned farm house, roof sagging like the back of an old horse. Turning off the road, he drove the Zundapp through an opening in the stone wall which ringed the farm yard. Overgrown trees ringed the farmhouse, their thick trunks sheathed with ivy. A flock of crows scattered from their branches, their ghostly shapes reflected in the puddles of the farmyard.

When he cut the engine, silence descended upon him. Removing his gauntlets, he scratched at the dried mud which had spattered on his chin. It flaked away like scabs, revealing a week's growth of stubble beneath.

Shutters hung loose and rotten on the windows of the farmhouse. The door had been kicked in and lay flat on the floor inside the house. Dandelions grew between cracks in the floorboards.

He set the Zundapp on its kick stand, drew his gun and stepped cautiously into the house. Holding the revolver down by his side, he trod across the creaking floorboards, gray light filtering through the slits between the shutters. In the fire place, a pair of dragon-headed andirons scowled at him as he walked by.

"There you are," said a voice.

The Zundapp rider flinched, but he did not raise the gun. He stood still, scanning the shadows. Then he spotted a man, sitting at a table in the next room, which had once been a kitchen. The stranger smiled, raised one hand and moved it slowly back and forth. "Nice motorcycle," he said.

The rider put away his gun and stepped into the kitchen.

"Right on time," said the man. Set on the table in front of him was a Tokarev automatic pistol, two small metal cups, each one not bigger than an eggshell. Beside the cups stood an unopened bottle of Georgian Ustashi vodka, a blue-green color from the steppe grass used to flavor it. The man had placed a second chair on the other side of the table, so that the rider would have a place to sit. "How was your trip?" asked the man.

"Do you have it?" said the rider.

"Of course." The man reached into his coat and pulled out a bundle of documents which had been rolled up like a newspaper. He let them fall with a slap onto the table, raising a tiny cloud of dust from the dirty wooden surface.

"That's everything?" asked the rider.

The man patted the bundle reassuringly. "Full operational schematics for the entire Konstantin Project."

The rider put one foot on the chair and rolled up his trouser leg. Taped to his calf was a leather envelope. The man removed the tape, swearing quietly as it tore away the hair on his leg. Then he removed a stack of money from the envelope and laid it on the table. "Count it," said the Zundapp rider.

Obligingly, the man counted the money, walking the tips his fingers through the bills.

Somewhere above them, in the rafters of the house, starlings trilled and clicked their beaks.

When the man had finished counting, he filled the two small cups with Vodka and lifted one of them. "On behalf of the White Guild, I would like to thank you. A toast to the Guild and to the downfall of Communism!"

The man did not reach for his cup. "Are we finished here?" he asked.

"Yes!" The man knocked back his vodka, then reached for the second cup, raised it in salute and drank that too. "I think we are finished."

The rider reached across and picked up the documents. As he tucked the bundle into the inside pocket of his coat, he paused to look around the room. He studied in the canopies of spider webs, the

puckered wallpaper and the cracks which had wandered jerkily across the ceiling like the growth lines on a skull. You will be home soon, he thought to himself. Then you can forget this ever happened.

"Would you care for a smoke?" asked the man. He laid a cigarette case on the table and set a brass lighter on top.

He stared at the stranger, almost as if he knew him from someplace before but could not remember where. "I should be going," said the rider.

"Maybe next time," smiled the man.

The rider turned away and started walking back towards his motorcycle.

He had gone only three paces when the man snatched up his Tokarev pistol, squinted down the line of his outstretched arm and, without getting up from the table, shot the rider in the back of the head. The bullet tore through the rider's skull and a piece of his forehead skittered away across the floor. He dropped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

Now the man rose to his feet. He came out from behind the table and rolled the corpse over with his boot. The rider's arm swung out and his knuckles struck against the floor. The man bent down and removed the documents from the rider's pocket.

"You'll drink now, you fascist son of a bitch," he said. Then he took the bottle of vodka and emptied it out over the rider, soaking his head and shoulders and pouring a stream along the length of his legs. When the bottle was empty, he threw it away across the room. The heavy glass slammed against a rotten wall but did not break.

The man stashed the money and the documents in his pocket. Then he gathered up his gun, his little cups and his box of cigarettes. On his way out of the house, he spun the metal wheel of his lighter and when the fire jumped up from the wick, he dropped the lighter on top of the dead man. The alcohol burst into flames with a sound like a curtain billowing in the wind.

The man walked out into the farmyard and stood before the motorcycle, trailing his fingers over the Zundapp name emblazoned on the fuel tank. Then he straddled motorcycle and lifted the helmet and goggles from the place where they hung on the handlebars. He put on the helmet and settled the goggles over his eyes. The heat of the dead man's body was still in the leather eye pads. Kick-starting the motorcycle, he drove out onto the road and the Zundapp snarled as he shifted through the gears.

Behind him, already in the distance, a mushroom cloud of smoke rose from the blazing ruins of the farmhouse.