

To Yuri Slezkin

The author's family is deeply indebted to Aaron Hoffman, Elaine Koffman, and Ludmila Epshtein for their generous help, enthusiasm, and moral support in preparing this novel for publication.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dmitry Stonov (Motl/Mitia Vlodavsky, Motya Raskin in the novel) was born January 8, 1898 in the village of Bezdezh (Kobryn District, Grodno Province), in the backwaters of Belarus. His father Meyer Vlodavsky (Meyer Raskin in the novel) was a Jewish merchant of the first (the highest) guild who leased and ran an agricultural estate. Stonov was not only a witness to, but an active participant in, many of the dramatic events that shaped the history of Russia in the twentieth century. His life, rich in transitions, quests, tragedies, and ordeals, was quite typical of intellectuals under the Soviet regime.

The Raskin Family covers the author's youth, ending with his departure to a railroad construction site in the hills of Valdai. There, he lived through the revolution of 1917 and the civil war that followed. Aged eighteen to nineteen, Mitia Vlodavsky enthusiastically responded to calls for liberty and equality and to slogans like "Power to the people!" or "Land to the peasants!" In the civil war, he was on the Bolsheviks' side and even joined their party. He later became a member of the Workers' Opposition, headed by Alexander Shliapnikov, a prominent communist. This group argued for a greater role for the workers in running the state.

At the same time, he developed an interest in literary work. He wrote articles on battlefield-related topics and worked for newspapers in Vladimir and Kremenchuk. His native language was Yiddish, so writing in Russian was both a great challenge and an impressive achievement for him.

When Mitia Vlodavsky was twenty, he wrote two sketches based on his own life, and rashly mailed them to Vladimir Korolenko, the famous writer and humanitarian, known among other things for his strong stand against the notoriously antisemitic Beilis trial of 1913. In his essay on Korolenko written forty-two years later, Dmitry Stonov described the torturous feelings of fear, shame, and remorse that overwhelmed him the moment he

dropped the letter in the mailbox. Within a week, however, Mitya received a warm reply from Korolenko, with helpful suggestions and advice for the future.

This was not the end of his dealings with Korolenko. A few years later, Vlodavsky started the magazine *Raduga* [Rainbow] in Poltava, Ukraine, where Korolenko and his family were living at the time. Since Korolenko had openly rejected Soviet rule, he could no longer publish anything, and his family was in very dire straits, literally starving. When Mitia Vlodavsky learned about it, he persistently invited Korolenko to write for his magazine and even tried to obtain material help for his family through the local Communist Party committee. Sadly, nothing came out of it: Korolenko responded that he had nothing against Vlodavsky personally, but that he would not accept any help from “the bloody hands of the Communists.” When Dmitry Stonov was arrested in 1949, the original letter was confiscated. If it still exists, it will be in the KGB archives.

Also in Poltava, Mitya Vlodavsky met two literary authors: Yuri Slezkin and Mikhail Bulgakov. By then, Yuri Slezkin (1885–1947) was already a prominent, established novelist, who was very helpful to Vlodavsky in mastering the Russian language. He became Mitya’s literary mentor and a dear friend for life. *The Raskin Family* is dedicated to him.

During the early 1920s, Vlodavsky traveled across northern Russia and saw endless trains of boxcars packed with convicts and exiles. This is when he fully understood the nature of the Soviet regime and rejected it. The persecution of all groups opposed to the regime had already begun, and Shliapnikov’s Workers’ Opposition was no exception.

In 1923, Vlodavsky tore up his Communist Party membership card and changed his name to the pseudonym Dmitry Stonov, from the Russian for *moan*. Pseudonyms reflecting the suffering of the working people were popular at the time (see Maxim Gorky—meaning *bitter*). He then moved from Poltava to Moscow, where the only people who knew him were Yuri Slezkin and Mikhail Bulgakov, so there was no one to report on him.

As an author, Stonov flourished in Moscow. He wrote for the newspapers *Izvestiia*, *Gudok*, and *Trud*, as well as the magazine *Nashi dostizheniia*, and also taught at the Literary Institute. His first collection of stories, entitled *The Fever*, was published in 1925 by Zemlia i Fabrika, the publisher responsible for opening the way to many future classics of Soviet literature. Within the next twenty-plus years, Dmitry Stonov established his literary reputation with more than ten published books, including *The Raskin Family*.

In 1942, during the war with Nazi Germany, Stonov went into military service and wrote for several army newspapers. Two years later he suffered serious shell shock, was discharged, and returned to Moscow, where he worked for the Soviet Information Bureau and in radio, while continuing to teach at the Literary Institute. He was active in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC), writing for its Yiddish-language newspaper, *Einigkeit*, and maintaining close friendships with many members of the JAC board, most of whom were arrested in 1948 and 1949.

By that time, Soviet intellectuals were being arrested en masse. Fear in anticipation of arrest was a common aspect of Soviet life, especially for Jews, since by that time, Stalin was already openly pursuing his anti-Semitic policies.

In the early morning of March 13, 1949, state security agents burst into Stonov's apartment, arrested him, and took him to the secret prison at their headquarters, the Lubianka. In September 1949, he was sentenced to ten years of hard labor "for anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda."

The questioner who interrogated Stonov mistreated him and demanded not only that he confess his anti-Soviet activities but also that he implicate other writers—his friends such as David Bergelson, Vasily Grossman, Ilya Ehrenburg, Yuri Olesha, and many others. After a series of fruitless interrogations that took place each night, Stonov was transferred to another prison "for persistent lack of cooperation." For a whole week he was held in a special punishment cell, a damp stone-walled closet where it was physically impossible to lie down and difficult to even sit. Stonov gave a vivid description of this experience in his short story "Seven Slashes."¹

Stonov's fortitude saved his life, for had the interrogator found out that he had been part of the Workers' Opposition, most likely he would have been executed.

Stalin died in March of 1953, and the wind of freedom could be felt in the air.

Owing to the relentless, truly heroic efforts of Stonov's wife Anna, his case was reviewed long before those of many other innocent victims of the Gulag. At Anna's urging, some prominent authors like Konstantin Fedin, Leonid Leonov, Konstantin Paustovsky, and Semyon Kirsanov also worked on his behalf.

1 *In The Past Night* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 1995), 172–190).

In early 1954, Stonov's conviction was overturned. He was freed and fully exonerated "in the absence of *corpus delicti*."

After his release, Dmitry annually visited the areas where he spent his childhood and youth, collecting material for his new books. Within a few years, he published several short stories and two novellas.

Dmitry Stonov died in hospital on December 29, 1962, on the eve of his sixty-fifth birthday, a full twenty-three days after he had had a heart attack. The ugly aspects of Soviet life caught up with him: incompetent doctors, negligent personnel, and horrendous hospital conditions all contributed to his death.

Stonov summarized the lessons of his own life in the Soviet Union with an epigraph to his Siberian stories:

All his life, he fought against the Revolution—and the Revolution destroyed him.

All his life, he was neutral—and the Revolution destroyed him.

All his life, he fought for the Revolution—and the Revolution destroyed him.

Leonid Stonov

PART ONE

1

Meyer Raskin was fifty-four years old when the lease expired on Telyatichi, the large country estate that had been his family's home. Before closing his business, the old man, who had only a vague idea of his worth, finally sat down to count his money. Not including his sons' assets, Meyer himself turned out to have seventy-five thousand rubles.

At his usual brisk and somewhat agitated gait, Meyer went to find his old wife Chava, who had never been happy living among the Belarusian peasants. Her father had been a cantor and kosher butcher in the Antopol shtetl. When he was young, he once managed to put together two hundred rubles and publish his work on religious philosophy. It was a long time ago, the publication was a failure, and his hope of becoming a rabbi came to naught. He was poor, always in need, but he kept his head high, guarding his pride and independence. He married his only daughter to a poor country Jew named Raskin. The young man, who was seventeen at the time, arrived in the shtetl with his father in a simple farm cart. The two purchased paper shirtfronts and stiff collars to look good, and went to see the butcher. Three days later, after weeping on the withered chest of her gloomy philosopher father, the girl left her home and went to live in the country with people she hardly knew.

At first, she was afraid of the vigorous young Meyer, then she grew accustomed to him, then she fell in love with him. They were poor too, living in a shabby peasant hut. Its thatched roof leaked in the springtime, and in winter the half-rotten log walls creaked loudly. Chava did not sleep much at night.

Meyer's father ran a tavern. From morning until evening and from evening until late at night, the poorly lit tavern was filled with peasants who sang, drank, cursed, brawled, and collapsed on the floor. Drunk, they would now and then break a window, then sober up and pay for the damages. It appeared that Meyer's destiny was to open a tavern too, and live the way his

father did. But even as a young man, Meyer possessed energy that his ancestors lacked. He was incapable of sitting in one place doing nothing—some force always pushed him out of the house. For a while he bought up flax seed, another time he signed up to supply firewood to the village administration, yet another time he found a business partner, hired some peasants, and began digging for lime. . . . He kept starting new projects, rushing around, going on trips, and doing business with what seemed like incredible ease.

Within a few years, the hut where old Raskin sold vodka was replaced by a large house with a tile roof. Meyer opened a small store. His children were growing up. Young Chava quietly walked through the rooms, sat pensively by the window and, resting her arms forlornly at her sides, dreamed of her past life in the shtetl. When Meyer built the house and opened the store, she hoped against hope that her husband would settle down, stop traveling all the time, and perhaps just quietly live with her in the village. She was sick and tired of grim winter nights spent listening through closed shutters to the distant barking of dogs and the howling blizzards. Alone with the children, she had trouble getting to sleep in the large house that never felt cozy. The sound of dry floorboards cracking and the popping of wallpaper separating from the walls drove her insane.

But Meyer had no intention of relaxing or settling down. Sporting a suit jacket, a beard, and a rosy complexion, he was robust and resembled young Leo Tolstoy of the 1860s. He was brimming with energy. Whenever he stayed home for a few days, he would move the furniture around, change the dining room into the bedroom, the bedroom into the children's room, or tidy up the barn. During such work-free days at home, he would walk through the village dressed in his fine bowler hat, with his nimble hands clasped behind his back, humming Sabbath tunes, and making the peasants vaguely envious.

"How about that Jew?" they would say, clicking their tongues. They weren't quite sure how to treat him, and always began with his lineage.

"You're Yossel's son, aren't you?"

"Yes, Yossel's!"

Scratching the back of his head, one of them would say,

"And I thought you were a landowner or something. . . . Some Jew you are!"

Involuntary idleness made Meyer suffer, so in order to kill time, he would offer,

"Want me to show you a trick?"

“What trick?”

“Here’s what I’ll do: I’ll put a stick through your arms and legs, and you won’t be able to stand up.”

“Really?”

A skeptical smile would appear under the peasant’s thick mustache. In his own secret way, Meyer would push the stick through, leaving the man trussed like a sheep and begging,

“For God’s sake, let me out!”

But the Jew would walk away, chuckling and humming.

For weeks on end during all seasons of the year, Meyer rode around in his cart. You could find him in the most remote estates, villages, and shtetls of the district. Meyer had become indispensable; even some landowners turned to him for advice. Watching his children do their homework, he learned in passing how to read and write in Russian. He observed the landowners and picked up their refined manners: he said “thank you very much” to his wife after dinner in Polish, and once even kissed her hand, making her blush in embarrassment. The young woman grew more confident, and one night, after her embraces had put Meyer into a peaceful sleep, Chava gently shook him awake.

“Meyer,” she said, her voice trembling with self-pity. “Meyer, I’d like to ask you something . . .”

“What? Who’s here?” Meyer asked, alarmed and still half asleep.

“Nobody’s here. . . . It’s just me. . . . Meyer, enough of this wandering all over the world! You have a family, and you aren’t that young anymore. . . . Listen, let’s just stay home together. You don’t need to travel all the time . . . or . . .”

Her heart started beating faster.

“Or . . . I know you have money. Please, let’s move to Antopol, and start living like all Jews do. Here, I even forgot how to talk, I don’t speak to anyone for weeks on end. And in winter time . . . alone with the children . . . I’m terrified . . .”

She burst into tears.

At first he frowned, but then he patted her gently on the shoulder.

“Ah, you’re such a silly woman! And I thought . . . , Well, stop that. I know what I’m doing. Just wait a bit longer—we’ll live so well! We’ll ride around in a two-horse carriage.”

But Chava didn’t need a two-horse carriage. All she needed was the simple shtetl life, with old women, a synagogue, Friday night candles, and

warm comforting tears at Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. She sighed and wept softly for a while, then waited for the dawn with her eyes open, listening to her husband's robust, healthy snoring.

The years were rolling along, and the first three children were growing up: sons Ilya and Isaac and daughter Sarah. When the children had been younger and other Jews lived in the village, the families had hired an old melamed for a small fee to instruct the children in biblical wisdom. The melamed would dispassionately tell the children how Jacob fell in love with Rachel, how he was forced—against his will—to marry Leah, how Leah's children found the apples of mandragora, and how Rachel wanted to obtain those apples.

"Fine," Leah said, "But first let Jacob sleep with me."

So when Jacob came to his tent, Rachel met him and said to him, "Tonight, you are sleeping with Leah."

So he slept with Leah, and they had children . . .

Sometimes the melamed grew angry and spanked the children on their bare bottoms. When he had to punish the girls, he shut his eyes and whipped their rosy behinds, asking the boys,

"Children, am I hitting the right place . . . ?"

As an observant Jew, he was not allowed to look at a girl's naked body.

But as other Jewish families left the village, the Raskin children started going to the village school with peasant children. The Raskins kept to themselves. On their way home from school, the peasant children would scream at them:

"Dirty Jew, dirty Jew,
Devil's hiding behind you!"

Looking at her children, Chava would shake her head and wipe away tears. If her father were to rise from his grave and see how his grandchildren were growing up, one would think he would die all over again! And these are the grandchildren of a cantor, almost a rabbi! No synagogue, no proper prayers—they will forget everything among these Christians!

It didn't trouble Meyer at all. It was as if he didn't notice his wife's concerns, he was too busy. The children? Let them grow, they will be good for something! He did love them enough, though. At first he brought them toys and candy from Pinsk and Kobryn, later he brought books.

After a break of ten years, Chava became pregnant again. At three-year intervals, she gave birth to Hersh, Motya, and Sheva. The older children were growing up and finishing their studies. They were healthy, but more and more Chava thought about what would become of them.

“It’s no joke! Ilya, the oldest one, is fifteen. The boy is fifteen, and how does he spend his time? He wheedled fifty kopeks out of his father and gave the coin to a peasant who made a fiddle for him. Now he spends entire days scratching out sad Jewish tunes on that piece of wood. Oh, if only the cantor, their wise grandfather, were still alive!”

Chava, however, without noticing it herself, began to hum along with her son’s playing. She wiped her reddened nose often and swayed her head in tune. “What does Meyer think of the children? Does he think of them at all?”

Meyer did think about the children, of course, but he never talked much with his wife anyway, and he especially did not like to share his plans with her. He observed his children, but not through their mother’s sad eyes. He observed and noticed what he needed to know. He loved his children with a caring, practical love.

Ilya was an industrious young man. From his early days, one could sense a hard worker in him. When Meyer gave him a ruble, he created a ledger to keep track of his funds, binding several sheets together and separating the income and expense columns. He was meticulous, and even his handwriting was neat—straight and round. He respected his elders, counted every kopek, and played violin in his spare time. What more could you want from a fifteen-year-old?

But when Ilya turned sixteen, his father asked him,

“Ilya, if I gave you a project, do you think you’d be able to see it through?”

Ilya put down his violin and paused. He bit his fingernails for a while and answered the question with a question,

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Excellent,” Meyer said. “I’ve just purchased a forest parcel in Adryzyn. Of course, there will be a man there to oversee things, but you will need to keep an eye on the operation, too. A hired hand is one thing and an owner is something else.”

“Yes,” Ilya replied readily. “Why not? Of course!”

So, Meyer took Ilya to Adryzyn. The parcel was located fifty miles from their village. They made Ilya a sheepskin jacket and two pairs of good boots, one from leather and one from felt. Ilya enjoyed being treated like an adult, and he tried to emulate the merchants he knew in every possible way. He worked hard. During the day, he crisscrossed the forest on foot. In the evening, he recorded income and expenses in the ledgers in his

neat handwriting. He respected his elders, he was humble and curious. He tweaked his upper lip; he liked to listen and even tried to tell stories of his own. His father was a master storyteller, but Ilya wasn't nearly as good at it. Even though he added "in short . . ." to every sentence, his stories weren't nearly as lively and engaging as his father's.

Meyer continued with his travels. He gained weight. He wore stiff collars instead of just wrapping a scarf around his neck like most Jews did. People in the shtetls started calling him "Reb Meyer," and some tried to invest money with him.

"A smart Jew," other Jews said of him. "He's on fire! He comes from a simple family, but he's not your average man!"

2

At home, the older children—Isaac and Sarah—continued to mature, and the younger three were growing out of their diapers. Isaac also played the violin, but not the sad Jewish tunes favored by Ilya. He composed his own music, and at times even he couldn't tell exactly what he was playing. However, Isaac was more concerned with his looks. He was handsome. He loved to stand in front of the mirror for hours when no one was watching. Once, when his father was at home, a landowner came to visit, bringing his son with him. The son's hair was slicked down. After that, Isaac began to wear his hair the same way, and the result looked quite striking on him.

Sarah was a reader. She was a quiet girl, somewhat secretive. People often thought that she was unhappy about something or thinking sad thoughts. She made no friends, not even with the rabbi's children or those of the woman who worked at the liquor store. Only after Sarah had finished the few books that they had at home, did she start visiting the saleslady at the liquor store and borrowing books from her, because the woman had subscribed to *Niva* since time immemorial. The illustrated magazine came with literary supplements. The supplements didn't last Sarah very long, though. The saleslady was a stylish woman, always following the world's fashions through magazines. She once told Sarah that wearing a red ribbon in her braid was ugly and in poor taste. Sarah blushed and burst into tears. She stopped visiting the liquor store and even avoided leaving home if she could help it.

When summer came, Meyer took Isaac and Sarah to the city of Pinsk. That journey had a lasting effect on the way the children chose to lead their lives.

They stayed in Pinsk with Daniel Yaglom, a distant relative. Oh, this was a very different household! On the way there, however, Meyer had spoken of Yaglom with scorn.

“What is wrong with these people? One day they have money and live like magnates, the next they have no money and are dying of hunger. Hah! They think they are nobles! Oh yes! And at times, other people’s money somehow sticks to their fingers. Nobles, huh!”

But no matter what their father said, Isaac and Sarah were absolutely enchanted by their relatives. The Yagloms had curtains covering their windows, their maids wore starched aprons with shoulder straps, their two daughters studied at the gymnasium,² and everyone in the house—even the parents—spoke Russian rather than Yiddish. Students from technical schools came to call on the daughters, who were fifteen and sixteen years old. The older daughter played the mandolin and sang romantic ballads like a grown-up.

Sarah was all ears and tried to catch every word that the young people said. Now these were real people! Isaac quickly realized that he couldn’t possibly compete with the students—they spoke unaccented Russian, they were far more knowledgeable than he was, and they knew how to court young ladies. So he set out to distinguish himself in a different way. The students wore black uniform jackets with gold buttons, and simple shoes. Isaac convinced his father to buy him a real grown-up suit, complete with collar, cuffs, and tie. The barber did his hair in the latest style. Isaac’s plan paid off handsomely. Rachel, Yaglom’s older daughter, couldn’t take her eyes off him. She started complaining that she was bored, that the students were stupid and dull. She said all this openly and without hesitation, as no one in the Yaglom household was afraid of candor. But the Raskins—even Meyer—were taken aback when Daniel bluntly asked Rachel, “Do you like Isaac?” and she replied without even lowering her eyes, “Very much so!”

“Listen, you village capitalist,” Daniel Yaglom said, moving his glasses to his forehead and putting on a pair of silver pince-nez. “Here is what I have to say. Leave your children in Pinsk, and I will make them into real people! For Isaac, we will hire a tutor. The technical school director doesn’t ask too much: five hundred rubles will make Isaac a student. We’ll enroll Sarah in the gymnasium. I won’t charge you much for room and board either.”

In his head, Meyer quickly added up what all this would cost him. “Oh, no,” he thought to himself, “I haven’t lost my mind yet! Nothing good ever

2 A fairly privileged secondary school in old Russia, with emphasis on humanities. Technical schools were nearly equivalent to gymnasiums but emphasized sciences. All notes are by the translators.

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