Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer

A novel by the bestselling author of *Dreams of My Russian Summers*

ANDREÏ MAKINE

"Brilliant . . . [Makine's] most exquisitely wrought work."
—Richard Bernstein, *The New York Times*

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TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY
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Andreï Makine was born in 1958 in the former Soviet Union. In 1987, he emigrated to France, where he began writing fiction. His novel *Dreams of My Russian Summers* won the Goncourt Prize and the Médicis Prize—France's two most prestigious literary awards—in 1995.

For Marie-Claude

For Guy

Translator's Note

Andreï Makine was born and brought up in Russia, but *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer,* like his other novels, was written in French. Most of the book is set in Russia and the author uses some Russian words in the French text, which I have kept in this English translation. These include: *izba* (a traditional wooden house built of logs); *babushka* (a grandmother); *soviet* (an elected local or national council in the former U.S.S.R.); *shapka* (a fur hat or cap, often with ear flaps).

In conversation, the characters sometimes allude to well-known historic names and to some specifically associated with the Communist period. The Nevsky Prospekt is the principal avenue in St. Petersburg (Leningrad); the *Sedov* icebreaker was named after the navigator and Arctic explorer Georgyi Sedov; the Smolny is the building in Leningrad (once a girls' school) from which Lenin launched the October Revolution, and which for many years was the regional headquarters of the Communist Party; Kliment Yefremovich Voroshilov was responsible, as commissar for defense (from 1925 to 1940), for the modernization of the Red Army and served as president of the U.S.S.R. from 1953 to 1960; Nikolay Ivanovich Yezhov was responsible, as head of the secret police (NKVD) from

1936 to 1938, for the most severe purges; Belomor is a brand of very strong Russian cigarette with no filter; Treptow Park in East Berlin contains monuments erected under the Communist regime after the Second World War, including a statue of a Russian soldier rescuing a little German girl.

G.S.

CONFESSIONS OF A FALLEN STANDARD-BEARER

It was all so simple. Crystal clear . . .

The bugle sent forth its piercing calls. The drum reverberated. And so, too, high above its taut yellow skin, did the sky, whose wide tracts of fresh blue we drank in as we sang our lusty songs. Those drum rolls and those bugle calls shook the entire universe.

At the start of our lives it was all so clear. Our childhood had the tangy smell of gleaming brass, the martial resonance of a hardened drumskin.

And we marched along country roads with a bloom of dust on our legs. Always straight ahead. Always toward the radiant horizon.

Half the land was decked out in a dark lacework of barbed wire fences. Pinned to the ground by watchtowers. But as we marched along we believed it was advancing with us, this land of ours, toward the final goal, toward that horizon, already so close.

There I was, contorting my lungs so that the old bugle would belch forth in a sparkling cascade the bellowing

sound that to us was life itself, the joie de vivre of the half-starved children of the postwar era.

There you were, with your head tilted and your soft, dark eyes lost in the distance, raining down a brisk hail from your drumsticks onto the resonant skin.

Now we know all about it. . . . Those country roads were simply corridors between broad zones fenced in with barbed wire. Watchtowers lurked behind the forests. They marched us round in circles to make us feel we were advancing. Now we know. . . .

Amid all this ardent and incessant marching, like some blissful delirium, there was a port of anchorage: our courtyard. In the evening we would cross it. Without songs or drum rolls. Having done our duty. Taken one more decisive step toward the radiant horizon. We would collapse onto its trampled grass. For a well-earned rest.

On the long summer evenings the windows in the three buildings that formed the bizarre triangle of our courtyard would all be open. We would hear the soft mingling of sounds that emanated from these beehives. The hiss of cooking oil on a kerosene stove, the reassuring tones of a radio announcer, the somewhat lisping melody of a phonograph record, a baby wailing on the ground floor. This tranquil buzz was punctuated by the dry clicking of the domino players slamming down their pieces onto the wooden table in the center of the courtyard, beneath the poplar trees.

An angular face would appear at one of the third-floor windows. My mother. She would peer into the

courtyard for a moment, screwing up her eyes against the orange rays of the sunset. Then she would call: "Yasha!"

A man would get up from a bench beyond the damp clumps of dahlias, mark the place in his book with a twig, and make his way toward the main entrance. Totally bald and unbelievably pale, his cranium looked transparent. There were just a few silvery hairs curled low down on the nape of his neck. Passing close by us he would call out with jocular but firm gentleness: "All right, you pioneers, time to go and wash up!"

This was Yakov Zinger. Yasha. Your father.

A few moments later he would reappear in the main entrance. Walking slightly bent. Like someone going out of his way not to show that his burden is heavy. With small, nimble, taut steps. With an assumed agility.

On his back he would be carrying a man. The man clung to his shoulders with calm confidence, as children do. His pants legs were knotted in broad double bows. This was Pyotr Yevdokimov, my father.

Depending on what was asked of him, Yasha would sometimes put him down at the domino players' table, sometimes on the bench overgrown with the wild exuberance of the dahlias, where your father would normally read. We would emerge from our blissful torpor, pick up our knapsacks, the bugle, and the drum, and climb up into the communal hive filled with its buzz of domesticity. We had to wait for our neighbor to finish her laundry so we could wash, then we would eat in a corner of the kitchen before sinking into sleep. The pale, feathery light of a

white northern night settled around us. Its milky flurries dulled the brassy clamor of the bugle and the rattle of the drum in our heads. Often, through the first flakes of this opaline sleepiness, I would hear Yasha's footsteps as he came into our room with his passenger. He would set my father down, and as he left he would weave several whispered words into my dreams: "Okay then, see you tomorrow. Good night!"

The apartment where you lived was on the same landing.

Why, today of all days, have I been remembering all that fanatical marching of ours? By pure chance, it seems.

I suppose you know how Russians get their news here in the West? Someone in San Francisco receives a card from Munich. Surprised at this renewed contact through the mail, he telephones Sydney. "You remember So-and-So? Yes, we used to live practically next door to them. Well, he's in Germany. No, not permanently . . ." Three months later a long letter from Sydney arrives in Paris, and in a hasty postscript mentions that such and such a person is in Munich. . . .

It was the same with you. ". . . Yes, Arkady's gone," a transatlantic voice whispered in the phone. "He called a friend from Moscow and said he was going. . . . Where to? I think it was either Cleveland or Portland. . . . I can't remember now. . . ."

That "Cleveland or Portland" rang briefly in my ear

again. I had stopped at the hot, noisy Carrefour de l'Odéon in Paris. The coming and going at this crossroads renders one invisible. One can remain quite still. Keep one's gaze focused in the misty distance, on that past of ours, stranger than death. No one will pay any attention. One can even murmur softly, as I do now: "You know, we shall always be those pioneers with our red scarves. For us the sun will always have that faint tang of brass and the sky the resonance of drum rolls. You can't be cured of it. You can't get over that bright horizon only a few days' march away. What's the point of lying to ourselves? We shall never be like the others, like normal people. For example, like that man I see getting into an expensive car. He glides up to the steering wheel with all the smoothness of a bank card being swallowed by an ATM machine. The well-upholstered interior simply swallows him. First an arm, tossing his suit coat onto the seat, then a leg, then his head, and — zip! — neat as you please, he slips into it, as if into the soft embrace of a mistress. Smiling, relaxed. With one hand on the wheel, holding a slim, brown cigar, the other keying in a telephone number from memory . . .

"We'll imitate them. We'll ape their coolness. We'll allow well-upholstered seats to swallow us with the same easy smiles. But when all is said and done we'll always remain those young barbarians we once were, blinded by our faith in that near horizon. One vital element will always be missing when we ape them: knowing how to enjoy it. That's what will give us away. . . ."

I plunge into the network of little streets. Suddenly, a

burst from a jackhammer reverberates from just around the corner. My body reacts more swiftly than my mind, which is on its way back to civilization. It shudders as I swiftly repress the impulse to hurl myself to the ground, to lie flat, my brow hard against the sand. As on the parched soil of Afghanistan. My fingers grow numb from the weight of a missing automatic rifle. We'll never be normal people. . . .

I stare into the glittering darkness of a store window, straightening my necktie. I must leave you now. My school for apes awaits me. A major publishing house. My assumed persona is a stereotype, Russian émigré writer. My normal person's uniform.

The boys in the courtyard, our playmates, always teased you in the same way.

"Hey, Rezinka," one of them would shout. Rezinka (eraser), from Zinger, was your nickname. "This is how your dad looks, right?"

He would suck in his cheeks and roll his eyes upward, in imitation of a living corpse. You would hurl yourself at him with clenched fists, but rather halfheartedly. The joke had been repeated too often and now only provoked a few idle guffaws.

After all, it was very difficult to imitate Yasha, your father. From the moment when he had been lifted out of a mountain of frozen bodies at a camp in liberated Poland he had changed little. He used to say it himself, with a smile. "I never get any older. I'm just like I was at sixteen."

His eyes were deeply sunken in gaping sockets. As if somebody had taken this head, resolved to demolish it, and thrust his thumbs into the sockets, embedding the eyes in the brain. His vast cranium, because of its waxen pallor, seemed to be made up of fragile planes that intersected almost geometrically. He had no teeth left and smiled with tightly clenched lips, stretching them in a rather painful grimace. It was really hard to mimic him.

When they had it in for me it was much simpler. One of them would go down on his knees and shuffle forward, puffing and blowing and waving his arms in comic despair.

"Hey, Kim," he would cry, making mincemeat of my surname. "This is your dad going to catch a train, right?"

But when all is said and done these jests were not cruel. They arose from boredom between marches. For the people in our three buildings had long since stopped being surprised to see Yasha and my father crossing the courtyard in the summer dusk. From a distance you would have said it was a single man moving toward the main entrance with nimble steps. . . .

The triangle formed by the three redbrick structures contained a universe that was known to us down to the smallest clod of earth. Parallel with the walls of the buildings, and still following the same triangular formation, enormous poplar trees towered, taller than the roofs. In June their feathery seeds transformed the courtyard into a winter landscape. People spat and sneezed the whole time and

housewives cursed as they fished the fluffy lumps out of their borscht.

At the base of the trees, beyond a fence of rotten timbers, there stretched impenetrable thickets made up of jasmine and lilac bushes and flowers with giant stems that were known as "balls of gold." In little enclaves, half hidden by this abundant vegetation, there were several benches, including Yasha's.

At the center of the courtyard stood the domino players' table. Around it there were more trees, which were younger and seemed somehow closer to us, for we had watched them being planted. We were vaguely proud of knowing that we went further back in time than something in this courtyard. . . .

The table, made from thick planks of knotty oak, presented a surface that was the first in springtime to shed its layer of snow, being the most exposed to the sun. It was an intense delight on a dazzling day in March to sit down there, to take a magnifying glass out of your pocket — a real treasure! — and mark your initials on the still-damp timber. The fine bluish wisp of smoke tickled the nostrils and mingled with the snowy chill, before vanishing into the sunlit air. . . .

In summer a regular routine was resumed. On warm evenings the table disappeared behind the backs of men in shirtsleeves or sweatshirts. They grasped the slippery tiles in rough palms made clumsy by the lumps of steel they handled all day or by wrestling with the steering wheels of their heavy trucks. As soon as they began to slam down

their pieces with a deafening din the communal symphony of the courtyard found its tempo. On a bench beside each main entrance a row of babushkas chattered away, attentive to the most minor occurrence in the courtyard. The open windows spilled out their buzz, and with it came the sweetish, soapy smell of big washdays. The old swing groaned out its melancholy music. The shouts of invisible children pealed forth from among the bushes.

And like an absolutely essential note amid this gentle evening cacophony, my mother's voice could be heard: "Yasha!"

What did they talk about, those two men, sitting in their enclave amid the rampant clumps of dahlias and jasmine? It was of little interest to us, taken up as we were with the giddy round of our marching and our games. One day as I lingered near them, I heard a scrap of their conversation. It was nothing more, it seemed to me, than a slow recital of the names of towns. Polish, to judge by the sound of them. I already knew that my father had lost his legs in Poland and that Yasha had "moved house," as he himself put it, three times from one camp to another. For them these Polish names, without further comment, were eloquent. A look they both understood, a tilt of the head, sufficed.

On another occasion I found myself behind them quite by chance. We were playing at war. Sent out as a scout, I was creeping along through the depths of the impenetrable undergrowth, cocking my ear, my legs tingling