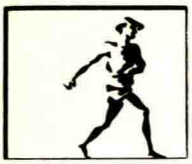
A NOVEL

THE MIND PALACE

BY

STEVE R. PIECZENIK



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NEW YORK

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Published by Simon and Schuster
A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
Simon & Schuster Building
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, New York 10020
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Designed by Irving Perkins Associates
Manufactured in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Pieczenik, Steve R.
The mind palace.

I. Title.
PS3566.I3813M5 1985 813'.54 85-11905
ISBN: 0-671-52433-X

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This novel is a work of fiction based on a history of psychiatric repression in the Soviet Union. Although the places described in the novel do exist, the events and characters are completely fictional . . . but possible.

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the following people:

Robert Gottlieb of the William Morris Agency, agent extraordinaire, whose faith in me and commitment to the project were inspirational;

Herman Gollob, my simply awesome editor, a writer's dream—persistent, patient, and demanding;

Deborah Gordis, his literary assistant—forthright, dedicated, and meticulous;

Birdie, my wife, whose loving support and critical comments were indispensable.

To my dearest mother, who entrusted me with her love of books, and to the memory of my father, who taught me the necessity of discipline.

PROLOGUE

TBILISI, GEORGIA, 1984

Memories of a more flamboyant time swept across Anatoly Sukhumi's mind. Once, long ago, he thought, before there was a need for the Revolution, Rustaveli Boulevard, with its majestic sycamore trees, harbored all the colorful human elements who would now be considered anti-Soviet. Gangsters, wearing pinstriped suits with wide lapels and baggy pants, exhorting Jewish merchants to buy stolen goods. French-speaking aristocrats dismissing dark-eyed Georgian street urchins hanging on their sleeves. He recalled the melodious chant of the Greek street vendor demonstrating his wares to the Rumanian middleman, who simply walked across the street and sold it to a Bulgarian tourist sitting at the café beneath the shade of a lush acacia. Occasionally Sukhumi heard the sounds of Georgian hustlers hawking American blue jeans or Japanese radios and was grateful that corruption and the underground economy could still flourish beneath the oppressive weight of conformity and fear. How strange, he thought, as he gazed at the ornate building that once echoed the readings of Pushkin and Shota Rustaveli, the greatest of all Georgian poets, that he, Anatoly Sukhumi, general secretary of the Central

Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and president of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, should yearn for the sights and sounds he had helped to eradicate.

Eyes glistening, Sukhumi turned abruptly and returned to his *dacha*, to the surprise birthday party organized by his friends in the Politburo. He opened the door and was greeted by the raucous sounds of a lively celebration, the metallic precision of three balalaikas played by brothers from Smolensk who were officially assigned the much coveted unofficial designation of court musicians. Sukhumi loved the sound of the balalaika. It could arouse in the listener a series of emotions so varied, so rich, that all at once he found himself crying while exuberantly dancing the *kazatsky*.

Sukhumi grabbed Misha Kostenchik, the scrawny seventy-eight-year-old Party theoretician and dignitary, by the neck and embraced him warmly. "Misha, are you, my oldest friend, going to disappoint me on this, my sixty-eighth birthday? Look at you!" He pinched Kostenchik's cheek. "Only one glass of vodka. And no dancing."

Kostenchik pushed Sukhumi's hand away, unaccustomed to people daring anything more intimate with him than the salutation of a comrade.

Sukhumi clapped his hands to the rushing cadence of the music. "Misha! Misha! Just this once. For me. Forget the women here. They are like Swiss cows. Dance with me. Like the old days—when we organized the workers during the day and went whoring with them at night." Sukhumi grabbed a bottle from the table. "Here, Misha. Our elixir of courage. Drink!"

Kostenchik peered around the room, making certain that most of his colleagues were preoccupied, and drank the entire contents of the bottle without stopping, driven on by Sukhumi's hand clapping.

"Drink! Drink! Drink!"

Kostenchik threw the bottle to the floor. "*Zhigulevskoye!* In the fifty years I've known you, you still insist on drinking that poor excuse for beer."

"Misha, place your left arm around my shoulder, as I place my right arm around yours. Now, bend your knees so we can move

with some illusion of grace." Locked together, the two men moved to the center of the room, engulfed by a feeling of relaxed camaraderie.

It was, indeed, a rare sight to behold. The most renowned general secretary of the Communist Party since Stalin and the most austere ideological theoretician of the USSR, who had first been promoted to the Politburo by none other than Stalin himself during one of the major purges in the late thirties, dancing arm in arm through the smoke-filled, alcohol-reeked room, to the shrill ear-piercing whistles of the men, and the mocking catcalls and laughter of their female companions. Each complete turn brought a progression of faster rhythms, louder encouragements from the onlookers, and conspicuous expressions of physical discomfort on the faces of the two men who had for that moment disregarded their collective and well-publicized infirmities—three heart attacks, one pacemaker, one chronic gallbladder, two kidney stones, and one moderate gouty arthritis.

Suddenly, the music stopped. The musicians began to rest their instruments and leave their chairs. Sukhumi, panting and barely able to catch his breath, wiped droplets of sweat from his face. He walked over to the musicians. "Play, play," he shouted in a raspy voice. "What is this? A musical insurrection?"

The musicians' leader shrugged his shoulders as a woman standing behind the draperies emerged.

The woman applauded slowly, her eyes focused only on Sukhumi.

How incredibly beautiful she is, he thought, as he approached her with outstretched arms.

"So, it's you?" Sukhumi bellowed. "Grushenka, please! I've done what no other general secretary of the Communist Party has been able to do—what not even Stalin with his reign of terror could accomplish." He pointed to Kostenchik, retching on the floor. "Misha danced for the first time in fifty years."

The woman nodded her head, stepped down from the stage, and wrapped her arms around his thick neck. "My *bogatyr*," she whispered. "My hero."

The guests who were watching the couple started to clap in a slow rhythmic pattern. As if on cue, the three brothers from Smo-

lensk took up their balalaikas and began to accompany the clapping with a sensual, lilting melody.

"You know, you're a true Georgian beauty," Sukhumi said. Three years earlier, when he had first met her at an official Party function, he had been instantly mesmerized by her emerald eyes.

Sukhumi knew he was still very attractive to women, vigorous and self-confident. He could usually manipulate them into compliance, no matter how willful they might initially appear. But it was different with the woman standing before him.

"And you've had too much to drink," she replied with a sardonic smile.

The couple swayed slowly back and forth to the music and the applause, like two lovers-to-be entwined for the first time.

"My beautiful little girl," he whispered. She was thirty years his junior.

Running her long, tapered fingers through his thick black hair, she sang quietly in his ear.

Sukhumi rested his head on her shoulder, his eyes closed.

"Grushenka . . ."

"Even my *name* isn't really mine," she interrupted with an edge of sarcasm.

"That's not fair." Raising his head, he became noticeably agitated and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Grushenka is my name of endearment for you. Please, let's not fight again. Not on my birthday. Your being here today among my friends, in the open for the first time, is the finest present I could receive. Doesn't it mean anything to you that I insisted Misha invite you to my very own surprise party? No more clandestine meetings! I promise!"

"You had to conceal me from all these wonderful people? These good friends of yours?" She shook her head. "Which one? Which one would dare to harm me? And how do you know that they may still not want to harm me? Or you?"

Sukhumi started to laugh. What he suddenly found funny was neither the childishness of her question nor the obviously provocative way she had asked it. It was the way in which her question underscored the incredible degree of uncertainty with which he lived. How tenuous his stewardship was, despite a ten-year rule of the Party and the Politburo. And, yet, he survived by respecting

one reality above all others—*kto kovo,* who is on top of whom.

Drawing the woman by the hand, Sukhumi introduced her to a burly, short man in his late sixties, who was attempting to slip his thick, stubby fingers into the open blouse of an equally heavyset woman, easily twenty years his junior.

"Oleg, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but I want you to meet someone very dear to me."

Field Marshal Oleg Rusanov bowed his head, clicked his heels, and almost fell over. He was very drunk.

Sukhumi held him up. "Oleg, tell this beautiful woman how many full divisions we have on the western front."

Abashed by the impropriety of the question, Rusanov hesitated. "General secretary, please, I find this question highly unusual under such circumstances."

"Oleg, I appreciate your discretion. But I assure you that you can trust her. Because I trust her!"

"Of course. Of course," Rusanov replied obsequiously. "I didn't mean to impugn her character. Please forgive me."

She nodded, smiling. How amusing he is, she thought. An old man who likes to play war.

"There are fifteen regular army units, Category One preparedness, stationed from the Balkan to the Baltic seas. On the eastern front we have another fifteen to twenty divisions, mainly Category One, some Category Two preparedness. With the fifteen Warsaw Pact divisions stationed in East Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia we have a full army complement of thirty divisions."

"Thank you, Oleg!" Sukhumi took the woman's arm, and as they walked away he whispered, "He is my field marshal who makes certain that our foreign borders are secure. So there can never be the possibility of another invasion of our homeland."

"How do you know he can be trusted?" She recalled Sukhumi's description of Rusanov as one of "Misha's minions," a group of Politburo members opposed to Sukhumi's vision of major changes in Soviet society.

"Come with me."

They crossed the room, and Sukhumi greeted a wiry, well-dressed man in his early fifties.

"May I present Leonid Donskoi, chief of Internal Security for

the KGB. This man makes certain that I know as much as I need to know about the field marshal's stable of generals. What they do. Who they consort with. Comrade Donskoi is particularly talented at assessing potential problems—malcontents, dissidents, heretics—and informs me accordingly. He is also responsible for controlling civilian unrest—spotting it wherever it may arise and crushing it before it becomes unmanageable."

The woman disliked Donskoi immediately. He appeared too self-contained, too aloof, alone in a corner watching the rest of the guests enjoy themselves, as if he were above such mundane pleasures. There was also something too natty about him, almost foppish—a silk tie, a body-fitting shirt, and a stylish Italian suit neatly tapered to fit his trim physique. Something slightly effeminate, she concluded.

"You must be quite a busy little man," the woman said.

Donskoi smiled and nodded his head, seemingly oblivious to her remark. "This is a most unusual opportunity. To have the pleasure of attending the general secretary's birthday party *and* to have the pleasure of meeting his charming"—he paused, obviously hesitating to find the right word—"if I may say so, friend. Now I understand why you have been kept such a carefully guarded secret from his close friends."

"But, Comrade Donskoi, with the exception of yourself and one or two others, I'm quite familiar with his 'close friends,' " she replied, obviously lying.

"Ah, Grushenka!," Sukhumi said. "I regret not having taught you the art of diplomacy. But subtlety has never suited your temperament."

Placing her arm through his, she replied with a proud voice, "If you sleep with pigs long enough, you begin to act like one. Right, Comrade Donskoi?"

Nonplussed, he replied, "There's very little that the general secretary does not know about me, Miss . . ." He stopped, fearful of revealing the fact that he knew her real name. "He will, if he sees fit, explain to you that I am not a man who can be easily provoked. As a matter of fact, one might say that I enjoy provocation." Pausing for a moment to assess the surprise on her face, he continued. "Who and what I am to the general secretary remains

strictly and, I might add, comfortably between us. Isn't that right, Comrade Secretary?"

For the first time in three years that she could recall, someone was speaking to the general secretary with the same authoritative manner that he consistently demonstrated toward others. She was eager to see how Sukhumi would handle the insolence of this *apparatchik.*

Sukhumi placed his hand on Donskoi's shoulder and replied in a gentle voice, "No need to become jealous. Our marriage is still intact."

In response, Donskoi embraced Sukhumi with a bear hug.

The woman pulled Sukhumi away, placed her arms around his neck, and began to sway to the lilting music. "Who watches your good friend Donskoi?" she asked nervously.

He laughed. "Grushenka, how little you trust people."

"You look wonderfully tired for a sixty-eight-year-old man. You need some rest. Why don't we sit down?"

"I'm healthy and happy. Stop acting like my nursemaid." He kissed her forehead. "And if you want a serious answer to a serious question, you can't wander away from the topic."

"You mean Donskoi?"

"Yes."

"Well, maybe I don't want to know the answer. He's frightening. And whoever controls him has to be that much more so."

"You see Misha, that wretched soul?"

"You mean he controls Donskoi?"

"Yes. Frail but tough Misha."

"And who watches over Misha?"

Sukhumi whispered in her ear, "Yours truly."

"And, my handsome stallion, who watches over you?"

"Probably only you, my dear Grushenka. Only you! Now you know why it has taken me over thirty years to get here. I needed enough people to watch each other so that there would be no one left to watch over me."

He laughed loudly. And then stopped.

Resting her head on his shoulder, she sensed that something was wrong. Sukhumi's arms suddenly felt heavy, leaden. His movements slowed and became awkward. His breathing became

rapid and shallow. And as she peered into his face, wondering what was happening, she saw his pupils dilate and his face break into a heavy sweat. Clutching his heart, Sukhumi fell to the ground.