

Excerpt from the book

Unknown Connections

by

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The violent pogrom of 1905 in Feodosiya, a small port city in the Crimea, destroyed the family of two brothers, Noah and Isaac Shmurak. They decide to follow their destinies to new lands—one in Russia, the other in America. This epic story covers five generations—the years after the pogrom through the fall of the Soviet Union, with the drama of the turn-of-the-century shipping industry, oil wildcatters, two world wars, and the Cold War and includes the drama of the development of the atomic submarine by both the Soviet Union and the United States.

CHAPTER ONE

On the first cold day in the early fall of 2002, a middle-aged man drove his car to a guard post that limited public access to the Kremlin. The taciturn guard examined his papers, and the man received a perfect Russian military salute from the guard.

Vice Admiral Vasilli Ivanovich Petransky, Soviet Navy (retired), was a frequent visitor to the forbidding fortress. Here, the Russian senior officers of both political and military factions met frequently for business and occasionally for social reasons. This occasion was social.

Since the fall and dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989, the Russian Bear had been ill at ease. The once-mighty military organization had fallen into disuse. The United States of America had turned from a dangerous enemy to a potential ally and possible friend. The Russians still mistrusted American motives and, at times, worried about American actions. There was, however, a grudging understanding of the American position by the senior Russian military caste.

This viewpoint was reciprocated by the Americans. They began to comprehend the Russian point of view, once the tension of possible nuclear war had been relieved. Frequent peer interchanges between the corresponding military services were helpful. The powers-that-be felt that developing relationships between men and women of similar interests and backgrounds would be of value to everyone. Tonight there was a reception for several retired American naval officers who had specialized in oceanography and related fields. Vice Admiral Petransky was asked to meet, greet, and host Vice Admiral Richard Wilson, U.S. Navy (retired).

Petransky, dressed in formal civilian clothes, entered the building and walked through the familiar doors and passageways. He absently massaged his two right earlobes—a genetic characteristic of the male side of the family for several generations. Rubbing the double earlobe was a habit with all the Petransky men.

He arrived at the reception rooms and greeted old colleagues and friends. The Russians waited for the bus to arrive with its load of American naval officers. Of the Russians and Americans alike, some were still on active duty, and some, like Petransky, were retired.

The wait was not long. After about fifteen minutes, a group of about twenty men and women were escorted into the room. They were given a round of polite applause, which was the Russian tradition.

The Russians were lined up in a receiving line in order of rank. The Americans were bundled into the same sort of line, and they were introduced to each other. As the lines shuffled by one another and appropriate introductions were made, the two vice admirals finally met.

They looked at one another with surprise. Vice Admiral Richard Wilson also had a double right earlobe. Startled, he stared at Petransky in amazement and smiled at this unexpected coincidence. They simultaneously reached for their earlobes and laughed.

Wilson had studied the Russian language for several years. Although he was by no means fluent in the language, he could speak and understand Russian at a reasonable level of expertise. Petransky could also operate in English, but not quite as well as Wilson could in Russian.

“I see that you have a double right earlobe,” said Wilson. “I thought that this characteristic was a special trait of only my family. I have never seen this particular characteristic on any other man, either in the United States or here in Russia. Now I find that my host has the same double right earlobe that my family has. This is indeed a most strange coincidence.”

“I am amazed,” said Petransky. “The same characteristic exists in my family also. In all my years, I have never seen this before on any other man or woman. Do you think we might be related?” He laughed with pleasure at his small joke.

They exchanged information about their families. Petransky came from the area of St. Petersburg, and his family had lived in Kronstadt as long as he could remember. Wilson said that he was a Texan, born and bred, and had no known family roots in Europe or Russia. The men laughed about the double right earlobes as an unusual coincidence and began to discuss other things.

In the course of the evening they found themselves inexplicably drawn to each other. Their views about art, music, naval matters, current and recent history, hobbies, and other interests were similar. They genuinely found each other of great interest. Both men had polished appearances and substantial reputations. They had advanced through the officers’ corps during the Cold War, and both had extraordinary naval careers in their respective services.

After two hours of making the rounds at the diplomatic reception, Petransky thought that he wanted to know more about this American, and he did something that was most unusual for him. He invited Wilson back to his apartment. Wilson found the idea appealing and immediately accepted.

They left the reception, and Petransky drove down the deserted streets to his home, which was not far from the Kremlin. They parked and entered an old building, where they proceeded to walk up three flights of stairs. On the third level, Petransky took out his key and opened the door to a spacious, but old-fashioned apartment. His wife, Uliana, greeted her husband, who introduced her to his American visitor.

She did not show her surprise at this uncommon event, but took their hats and coats and placed them in the front closet. The apartment's living room was large, and comfortable, overstuffed couches and chairs were placed to facilitate conversation. Antimacassars lay delicately over each chair, and lamps were strategically placed for maximum light. The room looked exactly like it was: an old-fashioned room right out of the early 20th century.

In the corner of the room on one wall, framed photographs of the Petransky family were hung with precision. The collection was quite extensive. The photographs captured Richard's attention, and he commented to Vasilli that the collection seemed to be quite substantial.

"Yes," said Vasilli. "It is one of my hobbies. I do my own developing and printing. We have a small room that I have turned into a darkroom. I like taking pictures of different peculiar shapes and, to please my wife, I also take many pictures of my son and grandson. Here, let me show you some of them."

Richard followed his host to the picture wall and looked at Vasilli's work. Clearly, Vasilli was an accomplished amateur. Richard looked at the pictures for a few moments, making the appropriate comments, and then turned back toward the room. As he did so he noticed another small picture, carefully framed and hung in a place of honor.

Startled, Richard stepped closer to the picture and viewed it with amazement.

"Do you like old pictures? That is a picture of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother, taken at the time of the marriage in 1847," said Vasilli. "It is one of the few things that has remained in the family since that time."

Richard stiffly turned toward Vasilli and said in a stunned, but controlled, tone, "I have exactly the same picture hanging in my living room in Annapolis."

The two men stared at each other and simultaneously reached for their double right earlobes.

Vasilli finally spoke. "I think it is time for a drink."

Richard nodded in mute agreement.

Vasilli filled two small glasses with Russian vodka and handed one to Richard. Both men raised their glasses and silently toasted each other, and then the picture. Then they sat down and began to talk in earnest . . .