

Short Story 90: The Peace Spy

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 12 Aug 2014

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Marc Aramini — 12 Aug 2014, 21:07

"The Peace Spy" first appeared in **Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine** in 1986 and is reprinted in **Endangered Species**.

SUMMARY: Sonja Aralov invites "Charles C. Percival" into her apartment, believing him to be an American who will help her return to the Soviet Union. However, his real name is Krasilnikov, and after some small talk about her furniture and the other Russians living in the United States as part of the guest exchange, Krasilnikov thinks that she does not know as much as she believes.

Krasilnikov says he has no intention of bringing her complaint to court where it could be stalled for perhaps five years, and insists that his methods will get her to return within five months. He identifies her father as the Minister of Marine, the equivalent of the Secretary of the Navy, and she goes to give him a check. He refrains from checking for American listening devices.

He asks about her father, and she replies that it was strange and terrible and her eyes fill with tears, at which point "he felt something he had thought dead since childhood move inside him." She describes how the President's son, a dancer, was visiting Moscow and decided to stay as "security against nuclear attack — just after [the Soviet Union's] Party Secretary had said **we** would never fire the first missile."

Others came, and soon the children of influential Russians decided to come to the United States as security as well. "She threw back her hair, her yes gleaming, and he thrilled as if to the call of a trumpet. ?Oh, they tried to stop us, but they could not send us to the gulag — they had to let us go, and they did."

However, she now wants to go back, because there is fighting in the east, and she feels she could do something, like become a nurse or even fight. Then her real reason for wanting to leave comes out: "I am so lonely here."

He says there are other Russians there, and that it seems her father doesn't want to see her. He sent money until she said she was returning, then she heard nothing more.

Here, "his hand touched hers. ?Has it ever occurred to you that perhaps your father doesn't really want you to return to Russian" "How do you know he's not secretly proud of you?"

She says he doesn't understand her country and Russian families, and Krasilnikov thinks, "He should have been proud, and he told himself to be proud but the thing that had awakened was weeping in his chest." Here he claims to be proud of the President's son, maintaining the ruse that he is American.

He offers to return her check, and says that if she still wants to return home they will see a lot of each other. She burned her passport when she arrived and reveals that her real resentment

is building towards the American government of putting every possible obstacle in her path.

He suggest that things must be done his way if she wants help and that she should get a green card and finds work to “pay the rent on this apartment and maybe some legal fees.”

He tells her she is wearing a beautiful dress, which flatters her, and then tells her not to wear it to find real work, then suggests that she tries modeling, perhaps only having to lose ten pounds (“Not for a man — but for a modeling agency, maybe. We’ll let Madame Deppe decide.”)

She agrees to go meet his Madame and attain a green card, and the phone rings. When he answers the phone at her request, a man says they are sending the actor Ipatiev to “hold her” and he thinks “Unless he goes to Hollywood.” When Sonja returns, he says the call was intended for him. Noticing the Time subscription, he thinks it a valid way to trace every agent, and looks at the current issue to see stories of the Chinese in Kazakhstan and the Red Army stopped before Paris. He thinks, “Better than when we were all so afraid, though at least we had peace.”

COMMENTARY:

The political message of the story is actually fairly deep: now that there are hostages in the two countries against the threat of nuclear war, the nations have nothing to fear — and is revealed in the final line, without that fear, even though it really hasn’t been mentioned explicitly, the world is now at war, with the Russians actually marching towards France. For the majority of the story, it seemed as if the world were now at peace thanks to this bold and self-sacrificing move, but it served to prevent only the threat of total annihilation and not war.

Krasilnikov’s motives are equally murky — even though he seems to be working to get her “out” of the United States in his American persona, working against the wishes of America, he drops enough hints and flatters her enough to suggest she creates roots there in seeking a green card and employment . Indeed, his flirtation and compliments create a kind of hopeful link for their future meetings, manipulating her away from her view that her presence there is useless and lonely.

The motives of the United States and the Soviet Union are actually marginally altruistic at first glance in this story — they want to avoid the final nuclear war at all cost, so they keep “voluntary” hostages of the other side, something which seemed fine to the main character, Sonja, until loneliness and another purpose enter her mind. The United States is reluctant to let her leave, and she willingly destroyed her passport on arrival. However, since the Secretary of the Navy has stopped sending money to his daughter, and there is war blossoming, it seems that the nations simply want war without the threat of mutual assured destruction.

From the title, “The Peace Spy”, we can assume that Krasilnikov is actually working to keep Sonja in the country, though there are so many ambiguities involved in his assignment that his position is very hard to determine exactly. His flattery seems to distract her very effectively. The United States hopes to get her to stay by bringing over a famous Russian actor and possibly fostering a relationship, but Krasilnikov knows this will be thwarted by the actor’s Hollywood ambitions — why would he stay with her in New York? On a first reading it almost seems that Krasilnikov would actually cause Ipatiev to go to Hollywood and never meet Sonja, but I think this is a misreading — he simply knows that the actor will have further ambitions leading him away from her. Krasilnikov’s other hints (that she needs to find work, taking all the money that she has, and planting the idea that her father is proud of her and does not want her to return despite his earlier angry letters) seem designed to keep her in the United

States. In the final analysis, if he is actually a spy who desires peace, he would help her go. However, since he says that the situation they have is “better” than when they were afraid, it is clear that his motivation is to keep the system exactly like it is: hostages against ultimate nuclear destruction while war blossoms in the world.

NAMES:

The Russian names mentioned in passing as hostages (or “guests”) are by and large those of military heroes or important political figures in Russia during Lenin’s and Trotsky’s time in particular. Symbolically these peace loving people have actually allowed war to occur since the ultimate threat no longer lingers, and they have become war heroes.

The most interesting is the name of Madame Deppe, who will decide which career Sonja should pursue, as the name implies a practical joker or professional comedian, right after Krasilnikov hints she should be a model.

Sonja Aralov: Sonja means “wisdom”, a Russian variant of Sophia, and Aralov was the first head of the Soviet Red Army Intelligence Directorate and served a pivotal role for Lenin against Trotsky from his placement in the GRU. Perhaps her wisdom is in recognizing, beyond her loneliness, that the altruistic gambit has actually failed, and war resulted anyway.

Charles Percival — Charles can be derived from “warrior” or “army”, but it is also related to Karl, or “free man”. Percival is of course the knight of the round table questing for the holy grail with Galahad, in some stories failing to answer the questions of the fisher king and heal him in others recovering the grail with Galahad.

Krasilnikov: In **White Terror: Cossack Warlords of the Trans-Siberian**, Bisher writes:

In Omsk, the capital of free Russia, a lackadaisically concealed monarchist gang calling itself the Mikhaïlovski Hunting and Fishing Society ferreted out Socialist-Revolutionary members of the constituent Assembly and sent them to the “Kingdom of the Irtysh”, in other words, murdered them and fed them to the fish. A prominent hunter was Ataman I.N. Krasilnikov, renowned for leading a reluctant Omsk orchestra in “God Save the Tsar” with his pistol, who orchestrated the kidnapping of Constituent Assemblyman V.N. Moiseyenko and presumably presided over the latter’s torture and ritual tossing into the Irtysh. — It did not bode well for a government that claimed to be striving to restore law and order. (117)

I believe his name might be related to the concept of beauty, but my understanding of Russian and the paucity of sources available concerning name meanings lead me to latch onto war references rather than the actual meanings of the names.

Lebedev means Swan, and there are several military “Heroes of the Soviet Union” of that name.

The most famous Deniken was a Lieutenant General of the Imperial Russian Army and an important general of the White movement in the Russian Civil War.

Mikhalevo is a place name in Russia, and Nina implies “grace”.

Ipatiev, the actor who theoretically will keep Sonja there, shares the name with a rather famous building: Ipatiev House in Yekaterinburg where the former Emperor Nicholas II of Russia was murdered with his family and household.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: Does Krasilnikov have more personal motives for seeking to work with Sonja, such as fostering a relationship? Sapping her funds and encouraging her to find a flattering career indicate he doesn't really want her to leave, especially since the deal involves him keeping the retainer whether she is freed from America or not.

Has something terrible happened to Sonja's father, are his letters and money being intercepted, or is Krasilnikov's claims that her father is secretly proud of her true? It seems that Krasilnikov is lying here to plant the idea that her father is actually proud of her, but can't show it, so that she will decide to stay. Is her father interested in fostering and spreading war as the Secretary of the Navy?

CONNECTION TO OTHER WORKS:

The central idea here, that children of influential people would be held as hostages against aggression, certainly has historical precedent but also appears in Wolfe's most famous series and is the very reason that Thecla is even there to meet Severian — the exultants must provide a representative of their family in the clutches of the Autarch to assure their compliance with his edicts and commands. Russian names and references may also be found in "Cherry Jubilee", but Wolfe is far more apt to make German and Irish references in his work. The idea that the threat of nuclear war is actually beneficial for maintaining the peace does not seem to be found extensively in Wolfe, as the fear at the end of "How I Lost the Second World War and Helped Turn Back the German Invasion" saw the threat as almost entirely ominous.