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**EDUARD KOCHERGIN**

**CHRISTENED  
WITH CROSSES**



**GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS**



**Eduard Kochergin**

# **Christened With Crosses**

*Notes taken on my knees*



**transcript**

**Glagoslav Publications**



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Christened With Crosses:  
notes taken on my knees  
By Eduard Kochergin

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## FOREWORD

*In order to spare my readers vexatious questions regarding the title and subtitle of my tale, I will first explain the second inscription, that is, the subtitle.*

*First, all events were written down haphazardly, on my knees, in tiny notebooks, in random places, wherever life found me and whenever there chanced to be a rare moment not occupied with the primary work of drawing.*

*Second, these are notes about a time when the system had the whole country on its knees.*

*Third, these are the fragmentary remembrances of a kid who got to live to the tune of triumphant marches in a rampant Soviet state orphanage ministry with all its grim claptrap, as did many other young guinea pigs, for a significant number of years.*

*Notwithstanding, these are simply notes, with no pretensions toward philosophical, sociological, or any other elevated conclusions. These are notes taken on my knees.*

*“Christened with crosses” is an old expression of former inmates of Russian prisons built on the cruciform plan of the original, infamous Kresty (Crosses) prison in St. Petersburg. It was a term employed by incarcerated denizens of the criminal underworld, whose neighbors during the Stalin years included political prisoners. The expression is capacious and ambiguous.*



Bronislava Odynets  
Chita, 1921

*To the memory of Mother Bronya,  
Bronislava Odynyets*



## MOTHER BRONYA, TAKE ME ON AS A SPY

The first conscious memory in my life is linked with the ceiling, Maybe I was ill frequently, or there was some other reason ...

I was born out of fear: my father Stepan was arrested for involvement in cybernetics, and my mother gave birth to me two months early.

I liked to lie in bed and travel, looking at the three-layered ornate cornice that decorated the high ceiling in my room. I could look at its fantastic curves for hours, with their strange stems and leaves, and in my mind I would travel along the winding spaces between them, as if through a labyrinth, and if the weather was bad outside, I could hide under the largest of them. At times when it was light, and especially when the sun was shining, I would happily swim over the surface of the ceiling into its center, to the rich baroque rosette, and along the old chandelier with three angels, each of which held three candle-holders with lamps, and I would sink down, tired, back to my bed.

My second memory is linked with baptism and the Catholic Church on Nevsky Prospekt. All of my senses already take part in this memory. That is to say, I don't understand what is happening,

but I absorb what is going on. The priest is doing something with me, boys in white are swinging and pouring smoke from shiny metal toys that look like Christmas decorations. There is a lot of white, a great deal of white – clothes, flowers, light. The smell of smoke is unfamiliar and distant, and it seems to me that everyone is in a bit of a hurry, and that there is something unnaturally anxious about all of this. I usually smile a lot, even suspiciously so for my mother Bronya, but I am not smiling.

I also remember the steps that lead to the church. This was my first ordeal in life (after all, I don't remember my father's arrest). For some reason I was forced to walk up them myself – with enormous difficulty, however I could: with my legs, on my knees, with the help of my hands, by rolling up them... I was very young at that time, evidently.

This was the first social entrance in my life, the first theater in my life, the first light in my life, the first music, and the first, still unrecognized love. If this hadn't been in my memory, then my fate would probably have been different.

It was 1939 when I finally started to talk. I started talking in late autumn, and only in Polish. For Mother Bronya was a Pole, and my Russian father was in prison at the Big House. Before that I only smiled when people tried to talk to me, and in general I smiled more than I needed to. I sat there, smeared in everything imaginable, and smiled... And suddenly I started talking, and I said quite a lot. Mother Bronya, of course, was happy, and even organized a Polish meal: with lentils, carrots, and guests.

The next morning they came for her. First the janitor Faina, a Tatar, came into the corridor, and



then came a polite military man with a cardboard folder, and someone after him. The polite military man asked her surname and Christian name, and asked several times whether she was Polish, and the others began to rifle through her things, the tables and beds. I tried to tell them that we did not have any bedbugs, but I lisped, and spoke in Polish. Mother asked Faina to call Janek from the first floor, so that he could take me. When Janek arrived, Bronya blessed me with the Mother of God and kissed me. Felya, my elder brother, sat by the window on a chair the whole time and silently rocked back and forth. He was already strange by then.

Faina, the Tatar, took pity on me, a premature child, and gave me to the Poles on the first floor "for safe-keeping". She soon also brought Felya, who was very upset: he hadn't been taken to the Big House, and was told that we were too young to be spies, but would later be sent to some orphanage.

Yes, I was very young. With my Godfather Yanek, a Polish cabinet maker, I travelled under many tables, couches and bunks, and closely studied everything under tables and sundry other "underneaths", and once in one cranny under a table I found something that was hidden from everyone, and was punished for it.

I must say that I liked Yanek's profession of cabinetmaker. I especially liked the wood shavings. They looked wonderful, and smelt delicious. I even tried to eat them.

I also remember Felya, after he was injured from beatings at school for his father being a spy, standing by Janek's large geographical map, running his finger along it and trying to find where

our father and Mother Bronya had been taken. Since that time I have always felt a certain hostility towards school. Janek said that our father and mother had been taken to the Big House.

What was this house? And why were spies taken there?

I imagined that in a dense forest with super tall trees, like in the fairytale of “Tom Thumb”, the Big House stood, and inside it lived brothers and sisters, who were spies. And what spying was, no one knew except them. This was a big secret. And this was why the forest was dense, and the house was Big. And little kids like me weren’t taken there, but I still wanted to go. I was left all alone, as my brother Felya died in a madhouse from pneumonia.

I was sent to a state house, and since that time my life became a part of the state. My ignorance of Russian forced me to keep silent again, as my Polish lisping irritated my class mates, and was dangerous for me: they thought that I was mocking them, and I became dumb again for a long time. We were moved from city to city, from west to east, away from the war, and I ended up in Siberia, near the city of Omsk. All the talking boys around me shouted loudly in Russian and even – so that I would understand – swore, and sometimes fought with me:

“What are you hissing for, snake, speak Russian!”

So I learned Russian, and didn’t speak at all until I was four and a half. I agreed with everyone, but didn’t say anything, “acting like Mu-Mu”, pretending to be a mute<sup>1</sup>. I started speaking Russian unexpectedly even for myself during the war.

---

<sup>1</sup> Mute like the deaf-mute master of the dog Mu-Mu in the famous Turgenev story of the same name.

We were fed from mugs – there weren't any plates. There were only metal mugs and spoons. Six people sat at a table – six mugs, and a seventh mug with bread cut into strips that stuck out of it vertically. Soup, then the main course, if there was one, and tea – all from the same mug. And this was considered normal. They let us into the dining hall when all the mugs were on the table, and until then, a horde of hungry boys crowded around the door. The doors were opened, and like animals we rushed to our mugs. Once, a pimply, sniveling “fly-by”, or outsider, was put at our table, and this boy, who ate faster than all of us, unexpectedly licked his dirty finger in front of everyone, and began dipping it in all our mugs. And suddenly I said something loudly in Russian – I didn't understand it myself, but it was something to do with his mother. The dirty boy froze in astonishment, and the rest were afraid: I didn't talk, after all, I was deaf-mute – and suddenly I started talking, and quite impressively. Since then I spoke Russian and gradually forgot my first language.

But I've become distracted from the most important thing, what worried us orphans of the NKVD (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) at the time, and the problems that we solved among ourselves:

“Can leaders be people, or do they have to be only leaders, and do they have to have whiskers?”

“Who's better: a spy or an enemy of the people? Or is it all the same? In any event, we're all together here.”

When boys met for the first time, they asked:

“Are you a spy?”

“No, I’m an enemy of the people.”

“But what if you’re both at the same time, like me for example?”

And also:

“Why is comrade Lenin a grandfather? He didn’t have grandchildren, after all. Maybe because he has a beard, or because he’s dead?”

“Comrade Stalin is the friend of all children. So that’s means he’s our friend too?”

Our eldest boy couldn’t stand it any longer, and asked the teacher about Stalin. First she got very scared, and then grabbed him by the collar and dragged him to the guard on duty – we heard him crying loudly there. And there were many, many more questions.

I personally believed that spying was not such a bad thing. My Russian father Stepan couldn’t have been bad. He was very fine and handsome – look at the photograph. And my dear mother gently sang me lullabies: “Sleep, my darling child, God protect your sleep...”, or:

Z popielnika na Edwasia  
Iskiereczka mruga,  
Chodź! Opowiem ci bajeczkę,  
Bajka będzie długa<sup>2</sup>.

O Mother Bronya, take me on as a spy. I’ll talk to you in Polish.

---

2 A spark out of the ash-box  
Winks at Eduard.  
Come! I’ll tell a story  
The story will be long. (*Polish*)

**Part 1**  
**PIPSQUEAK WARD**

*I'm not Mama's son,  
I'm not Papa's son.  
I grew on a fir tree,  
The wind carried me down...*

*(Orphan folklore)*



## THE BALLAD OF THE WOODEN PLANE

I can't remember how I ended up in the orphanage right before the war. My Godfather uncle Janek took me there. Or perhaps I was taken away from him. I don't remember how the war began either. I remember that all of us little mites, as the adults called us, suddenly started playing at war. The other kids made me, who lisped and barely understood Russian, along with two others, a red-headed Tatar and a second large-eyed, black-haired mite – Blackie – into Germans. We were attacked every day, and we surrendered. We were led around the rooms with our hands up, like enemies, and then, shot one by one, we were made to lie on the floor for a long time. I didn't like the game very much.

I remember how the portions of breakfast, lunch and dinner became smaller. And when it got cold and the snow started falling, the kids stopped playing at war.

Then something strange happened. In winter, some enormous Gulliver-like guys came to the orphanage in quilted jackets and earflap hats, and swiftly took away the nine most emaciated boys, four or five-year-old mites. The men had us lined up against the wall, examined us attentively, and

ordered the teachers to dress us quickly in the warmest clothes. They hastily put clothes of various sizes on us and gave each of us a heavy woolen blanket. Then, dressed, we went downstairs and out of the building, where a large rumbling bus stood waiting. Two of the guys lifted us up into it in turns. There were a few more adults in the bus in quilted jackets and earflap hats. On the first two seats, seven boys were sat down, and the wall-eyed Snotty and I, the last in line, sat among the guys on the back seat. To my right sat the senior Gulliver. He was in charge of everyone, and everyone obeyed him.

Winter that year was early, snowy and very cold. The entire city was covered in snow. The mounds of snow by the road sides were three times taller than me. None of us knew where the bus was going. When a boy nicknamed Stinky asked where we were being taken, the guy in charge replied:

“To the plane.”

“To the plane? That’s great! So we’ll fly in the air!” we said happily.

“Yes, you’ll certainly fly! You’ll fly over Lake Ladoga.”

We drove through the city for a long time, slowly, without stopping anywhere, even after the sirens howled and the bombing began. It was starting to get dark when we drove out of the city into an enormous snowy expanse, which was crossed only by our road. Suddenly the guys started to get anxious, and the drone of a plane could be heard. The driver increased his speed, we began to be shaken around and thrown from side to side, especially on the back seat. The road turned



out to be broken up under the snow. The drone of the plane approached.

“It’s a ‘Messer’” the driver said. “It’s going to follow us.”

“Put the children on the floor under the seats right now!” my neighbor ordered, and as soon as we had been pushed under the seats, the bus was riddled with machine gun fire. We probably didn’t hear the shots, the motor was humming and growling so loudly that we only realized the Messerschmitt had attacked us by the holes in the roof.

The first attack did not claim any victims. The driver squeezed the last juice out of the motor, to get out of this damn field as quickly as possible. The ‘Messer’ returned and, at low altitude, it attacked us again. The guy standing by the cabin fell down, and one of the boys screamed horribly... I instinctively looked out from under the seat, and suddenly the ‘Messer’ moved to the side of the bus and fired a round at the windows on the left side. We were literally showered with a huge amount of glass shards. One of them stuck into my eyebrow above the bridge of my nose. The commander who was sitting next to me immediately lifted me onto his knees and pulled out the shard. Gulping blood, I lost consciousness.

When I came to, I was lying on a bench in some wooden hut. Out of the window, I could see a large white field surrounded by forest. I looked at the world with one eye; my other eye, along with most of my head, was bandaged up.

At that time, I still didn’t understand Russian properly. The fur-hatted guy in charge took me from the bench and sat me down next to him,

closer to the burning stove, and said something to comfort me. Boys were grouped around the stove, and with serious adult looks they stared at the living flames. After a few minutes, a large copper kettle boiled on the stove, and a little later we were given a metal cup, a sugar cube and a piece of bread. A ferocious fellow with a moustache and beard poured tea into the teapot right out the packet, and stirring the boiling water with an enormous knife, he began pouring a little into our cups. When we had finished our tea, all the Lilliputian boys were told to get dressed, do their buttons up and go into the yard to answer the call of nature. Then each one of us began to be packaged up, wrapped in a wadded cotton state blanket, turning us all into babies stuck into pouches. There were seven of these pouches. Why not nine? Where were the other two boys? – I didn't know how to ask. Perhaps they were seriously injured, or killed when the bus was fired on.

In the darkness, the big guys carried us, like infants, to the plane that was waiting next to the forest. It was quite a large plane, so at the time it seemed to me, and a lot of guys were loading boxes into it, handing them to each other from trucks. The pouches containing us were also put into the plane in the same way, from one pair of hands to the next.

Inside the plane, we were placed in our wadded pouches on wooden benches with backs, attached to the two opposite sides of the plane, and with ropes were firmly tied to them. Between the benches, there was a shooting frame, resembling a stepladder. In the center of four wooden beams that stuck into the ceiling, there was a platform

made out of boards with steps. Above it, there was a hole in the ceiling, into which a large machine-gun was fastened. On both sides of this gun there were wooden frames, from the floor to the ceiling and from the right side to the left. Durable boxes were attached to them with ropes. All of the space, apart from the aisles, was filled up with these boxes. This plane had probably been hastily converted from a passenger plane to a cargo plane. The portholes in the form of ovular rectangles were covered with pieces of metal on the inside. The salon was illuminated with two dull flashing lamps. The same guy who had sat next to me on the bus was giving the orders. Everyone else, including the pilots, carried out his orders.

I was bundled up opposite the legs of the shooter, although from below I could only see his enormous black fur boots.

I recall everything that took place in the plane in fragments. Either I lost consciousness from my injury – the shard of glass in the bus had after all hit me hard – or like the other mites, I was given sweet tea with alcohol in it, to stop us from wriggling.

I don't remember our plane taking off. I was probably under the influence of the drink. I woke from the terrible shuddering and severe pitching of the plane, good thing that we had been tied up with ropes, otherwise we would all have slithered across the floor.

How long we flew, I can't say. A weak light was shining through the machine-gun hole – it was probably already getting light. Something was happening to the plane. The guys stood there holding on to the beams of the frames. The shooter

was firing his machine-gun from the step-ladder directly opposite me. I didn't immediately realize that he was shooting at the enemies who were following the plane. The pilots, trying to evade attack, began to maneuver in the air, rolling onto the left side of the plane and then the right. At these moments, we dangled from the ropes in the air in our pouches. I don't know how long the unequal battle with the "Messers" lasted. I passed out again. After a while I saw with one eye, as in a dream, that the shooter's step-ladder was being colored swiftly with something dark red. Blood. But where was it pouring from down the ladder, I wondered in my delirium. And suddenly, following the blood, the soldier's body slid down the pine steps onto the floor, his head shattered by a bullet. It began to smell of burning in the plane.

This was the first death that I saw, and I saw it up close. Perhaps because of my injury I didn't really know what was going on. Or perhaps after two and a half months in the blockade, I had already got used to the concept of death. But for some reason I wasn't afraid for myself, or for others. I accepted the soldier's death as a fact. War stupefies people. After the strafing of the bus, and the sight of that blood, something broke off in me – I was stupefied. The only feeling I had was one of cold. My legs in the blanket pouch had turned into frozen drumsticks.

Our wooden plane had evidently been hit. It started burning from the tail. The guys were trying to put out the fire with fire extinguishers. Suddenly a terrible pain pierced my ears – we were descending headlong. I disappeared from the world once more, losing consciousness. I came to

when my blanket pouch was torn from the cabin with a savage force. All of the men who had been putting out the fire tumbled to the floor, evidently hit. The plane sliced into the snow-covered bank of a lake, and began sliding across it on its belly. I even remember the strange squeak-hissing sound of the sliding. I remember cries (I didn't understand the words) that the guy in charge made to the pilots from the floor, when the plane braked. After this he got up, crossed himself, as it seemed to me, and started giving orders. He ordered some of his subordinates to quickly remove the pieces of metal from the portholes, break the windows and push us boys through them, and take us fifty meters or so from the plane. He ordered others to save the boxes, pushing them through the windows and doors, and others to put out the fire outside and inside, until the entire plane had been evacuated. He ordered the pilots to remove all the devices, and take the instruments out of the plane, along with the sheets of iron, the dry rations, alcohol and everything valuable they could. The people, like ants before a storm, bustled around the plane, taking boxes, instruments, food and other things out of its belly. I remember that the ropes with which we were tied to the benches were chopped through with axes, and the pouches holding us were pushed through the holes of the windows. I remember that we were all placed on the snow together, in a row.

As soon as the main cargo had been taken out of the burning plane, and dragged away from it as far as possible, the plane exploded. I lost consciousness again for a long time. I came to from the harsh smell of alcohol. In a hut made of boxes

and tarpaulin, the adults were rubbing our frozen legs, arms and faces with alcohol. To warm us up inside, they ordered us to drink hot medicine – water with alcohol.

Throughout the day, all the adults built a camp in the snow, resembling a round fortress. In the center of the circle they built a fire, which on the next day was joined by a metal oven assembled by handy men from pieces of iron off the plane. They made spades out of the remains of the metal, and small doors for dugouts. Everything that remained from the plane was used. Around the fire and stove, there appeared five dugouts with walls made of boxes and a floor of fir branches, covered with tarpaulin. I remember that the adults crawled into the dugouts. The warmest dugout belonged to us kids. With each day, our camp improved, and became cozier and warmer. I don't remember how many days we lived in it, but it was quite a long time. Initially we got water from the snow, and then made a hole in Lake Ladoga. To get logs, a road to the forest was cleared in the snow. The guy who was in charge sent the pilots to the nearest villages. They were dressed more warmly and had maps. They had to force their way over ten kilometers through deep snowdrifts.

During the first days we ate the remains of the dry rations, made porridge from rye flour and seasoned it with egg powder. The food was delicious. On the third day, the pilots returned on skis, and brought potatoes, cabbages, carrots, onions and other tasty things on sleds from the village. In honor of them, a feast was organized. We also took part – we were put on benches that

the guys cut out of pine trees, and were given a mug of the tea that came from the village. And a whole carrot for each boy, although not all of the boys knew what to do with it.

Not until several days later, two enormous covered vehicles on caterpillar chains came for us. We were packed into the blankets once more, and together with the tied-up boxes, we were put into the all-terrain vehicles. We drove away from the camp as it began to get dark, and we reached a railway station by noon the next day. I remembered that the guys were very careful with the boxes.

Later, at the station, or perhaps in the train, I heard that they contained the blueprints and calculations of our new destroyer plane, and that the guy in charge was the engineer who had created this plane. The engineer was called Sergey, and his surname was Yeroshevsky or Yaroshevsky.

But why did he collect us, state orphans, and not just normal children, in his plane, and take us from blockaded Leningrad? It was strange. Why did this kind Gulliver single me out from all the other Lillputs, and even bandage my head himself? Because I smiled at him with one eye? Or because I was wearing a cross?

We were taken by train to Kuibyshev, and put in the NKVD orphanage. The local teachers took the cross away from me, the only thing that I had left from my mother Bronya.

## STATE HOUSE

Pictures from remote years, which once seemed ordinary and uninteresting to us, drill themselves into our memory as time goes by, revealing themselves in all kinds of unexpected details.

In the savage times when millions of adults were fighting to the death in the European part of Russia because of two whiskered leaders, far away in Siberia everything was calm. Our life in a model orphanage of the NKVD, hidden in the village of Chernoluchi on the bank of the Irtysh River in remote Siberia, was nothing remarkable. We lived our lives in a state house, as the people said, but in warmth and under the roof of a solid four-story brick building – even if it was a former holding prison, which had become too crowded for adults and was given over for use as an orphanage. The institution became popularly known as the “children’s crosses”. Traces of feeding troughs remained on the doors of the wards, and prison bars had yet to be removed from some of the windows. But they didn’t bother us, on the contrary, and we managed to hide things between the frame and the bars. Our regime was very strict, almost prison-like: wake-up call, exercises, face washing, breakfast, study or work, lunch, sleep, brainwashing, supper, toilet hour, and sleep again – as prescribed by the last person to wear pince-nez in the Soviet Union, the marshal of the NKVD, Lavrenty Pavlovich Beria. But we slept in our own beds with sheets on them, and on Communist holidays and on the birthday of Josef Vissarionovich Stalin – the 21<sup>st</sup>



of December every year – we got without fail a piece of bread with butter on it for breakfast.

Everything was fine and dandy. The children of sentenced parents were called foster-children, and the supervisors were called fosterers. We called the guard “comrade watchman”, and the cell was attractively called an isolation ward. Above us all, like a star on a cap, hung the boss, Toad. She was the boss of the bosses: “you can’t approach her from behind, and face to face you’ll fall over”.

Officially, the inhabitants of the orphanage were divided into four levels: the eldest, the older boys, the boys of medium age, and the youngest. The age different between the levels was two to three years. Unofficially, according to the internal situation, the most important older guys called themselves dudes, and the next eldest were called lads. They lived together on the fourth floor and occupied several wards. We, the medium aged, preschoolers from six to eight, were called pipsqueaks, and lived in two wards on the third floor. Opposite us, across the staircase, also in two wards, lived the little kids – under the age of six, in our language called mites. The half of the floor that belonged to them was locked up, and we only saw them in the canteen or the yard, and through barred windows. On the doors of the wards, our names were scratched: dudes, lads, pipsqueaks, mites.

The left side of the second floor was occupied by the canteen, or as we called it the gobblery or scoffery, and the kitchen. On the right, below us, was the large assembly hall named after Dzerzhinsky, with a portrait of Felix Edmundovich

Dzerzhinsky on the central wall. Below the portrait was a long presidium table, with a red tablecloth on it, and rows of benches by the table. This hall was almost always empty. We were only allowed inside on holidays, when we were made to stand in line during ceremonies and visits by bosses. Behind the wall with the portrait of the goat-bearded Felix, there was another decent-sized room – for meetings of the fosterers and bosses of the orphanage. None of us had been in this room, but we knew that on weekends and holidays, the guards got drunk and celebrated behind the back of their legendary leader. On the side walls of the hall, two enormous paintings hung in frames – “Stalin in the Turukhansky region”, and “The Young Leader among the workers of Baku”, which the dudes called “Gangsters’ Assembly” or “Offloading of Rights”.

On the way to the canteen between the first and second floor, on a heavy pedestal that was painted to look like dark red marble, there was a white plaster bust of Grandpa Lenin surrounded by flower pots, which we secretly called “Baldy in the garden”. Before Victory Day it was suddenly painted bronze, and the criminal hooligans immediately renamed it “Bronze tank on holiday”.

The first floor belonged entirely to the orphanage board and its departments. To the right, by the main entrance to the reception, there was a corridor with the guards’ search room, where boys were examined in line after they came back to the orphanage after taking a walk or working. But we adapted to these searches and deftly hid the valuable things we had found outside, by handing them along down the line.

Behind the search room, in a former cell, there was an isolation room and sanitary checkpoint, where new kids were taken – they were kept in quarantine for several days, given treatment and then sent up to the wards.

In the next two wards there was a medical section – one of the most terrifying places in the orphanage, in our language the croakery or kaputka. Few of the children who were taken there returned upstairs. This section was led by a nurse called Absolute Drip. Her assistant, a deaf-mute nursing aide, a dirty animal whose stench killed flies, did not clean up, but simply spread filth around. In summer, the orphans who were doing forced weeding in the shed ate unwashed vegetables out of hunger, and died in Kapa's section from intestinal diseases. Once, after an excess number of children died at the medical section, some commission of officers with epaulets came along and gave the local bosses a dressing down. After they left, we saw the head of the orphanage cursing in foul woman's language and punching Kromeshnitsa's savage eyes with her pudgy fists.

The corridor ended with two cells. They had been prisoners' cells in the preliminary holding area, and remained so, nothing there had changed. In one of the cells, a strange inscription had been scratched on the wall a long time ago: "Some get a tator, others get a lator". Among the pipsqueaks, lads and even the dudes, there were rumors that these cells were haunted by the ghosts of two tormented prisoners of the consignment prison, and that at night they came out onto our staircase, and passing Baldy, also a former prisoner, they

went up to the second and third floors. God forbid you should fall into their clutches – they would take you away from this world to the next. We often heard some kind of prolonged groans and strange howls coming from the staircase at night. Perhaps it was just the wind.

## OF THE TOAD AND SERVANTS

The second, left half of the lower floor belonged to Toad and her helpers. Don't be surprised, the boss of our orphanage of the NKVD of the USSR was called Toad, and not only by the pupils, enemies of the people, but also by her subordinates, behind her back. This accurate nickname overshadowed her first name and patronymic, and any attempt to remember what her real name was only conjures up an image of an enormous, whiskered woman with short fat arms, many chins and no neck, and small, bulging toad-like eyes, who was always wearing green dresses, silk or wool, depending on the season. There was another memorable quirk that she had – to jump and kick her victim with her two heavy legs, opening her round toad-like eyes enormously wide. Serving in Lavernty Pavlovich's department, she was also an artist – she painted oil paintings. She combined her NKVD qualities with the talent of a great Stalin artist.

Her enormous office, the size of our ward, made up of three rooms, looked like a real artist's workshop. Two large easels, a pedestal with paints and a pitcher with brushes were the main items in the official dwelling of Toad. In the center of the





## Eduard Kochergin

Eduard Stepanovich (Stepanych) Kochergin was born in 1937, at the height of Stalinist repressions in the Soviet Union, and spent most of his childhood in a series of state orphanages for children of political prisoners. Years later he went on to become an internationally acclaimed

stage and set designer, and is currently the head of stage design at the Bolshoi Tovstonogov Drama Theater in St. Petersburg. National Artist of Russia, Laureate of State and International Awards, and member of the Russian Academy of Arts, Eduard Kochergin has designed more than 100 plays in Russia and abroad. In 2010 Kochergin was awarded a prestigious literary prize, The National Bestseller, for his memoir *Christened with Crosses*, based on his 6-year-long odyssey home from an orphanage in Siberia to his native Leningrad/St. Petersburg.



Orphaned when his parents are taken away as “enemies of the people”, young Stepanych finds himself a ward of the Soviet state. He is miraculously rescued from a government orphanage in Nazi-besieged Leningrad, only to be placed in another children’s institution in Siberia—a place of Dickensian attributes, where the leaders earn nicknames like Toad and Screwface, and where the young inmates are able to live their own lives only in secret, by night. Desperately longing for his native city and his Polish mother, Bronya, Stepanych flees the orphanage soon after the end of World War II.

This prizewinning memoir is the unforgettable story of a young boy’s dangerous, adventure-filled westbound journey along the railways of postwar Russia. Whether befriending a blind runaway, falling in with a gang of train burglars, witnessing an ancient beer-brewing ritual in a northern Russian village, learning the craft of fire-building from a Siberian hashish smuggler, or mastering the art of tattooing from a former Japanese War prisoner, Stepanych exhibits the resourcefulness and inner strength that allow him to triumph over peril and hardship. Most of all, this future artist hones the observant eye that will later enable him to vividly recount for his readers the several years of his long, obstacle-filled journey home.

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