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Rudolf Nureyev

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Extract

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1 A VAGABOND SOUL

Early one morning when six-year-old Rosa Kolesnikova woke up, she remembered first of all that she was on the train, and then she noticed the three Nureyev girls sitting on the bunk opposite. The toddler was whimpering, and her eight-year-old sister was trying to comfort her. She saw to her annoyance that her friend Lilia, who was also six, had taken her toy and was clutching it. Their mother was nowhere to be seen. Something was going on. In the corridor people were rushing back and forth talking excitedly, but no one would say what was happening. Later she noticed that next door there were sheets curtaining off the Nureyev compartment and doctors in white coats were going in and out. *Tyotya*-Farida must be ill. Throughout the morning, making some excuse, she and the other children jostled to see if they could peek through a crack in the screen of sheets, but her mother would call them back and try to distract them. 'Look, Lake Baikal! Lake Baikal! Isn't it beautiful?' she cried.

It was a cold, clear morning, and the lake, a sunlit ocean of ice, seemed to merge with the far-off white mountain ridges of Khamar Daban. For most of the day the train travelled along the southwestern shore beneath sheer cliffs and steep woods, offering sudden dazzling views of Baikal as it threaded through the tunnels. With its legend of the vengeful Old Man Baikal, who hurled a huge rock at his runaway daughter, the lake was a wonder for children: its size alone was breathtaking – four hundred miles long and one mile deep in the middle. By late afternoon, however, its fascination had worn off, and everyone was glad to get to the Mongolian city of Ulan-Ude, where the train stopped for several hours.

Almost all the passengers went into town to shop in the trading arcades and the poplar-lined main street, Leninskaya Ulitsa. When they returned, one or two of the women came up to the children with a large box and told them to look inside. There they saw a tiny baby swaddled tightly: 'We bought him in Ulan-Ude,' they said, laughing. 'It's a little Tatar brother for the Nureyev girls!' Rosa found this hard to believe. It didn't make sense that a Tatar child would be for sale in a

place full of people who looked so foreign, with their big foreheads and slanting eyes. Besides, before they arrived, she had heard the adults talking about a new baby on the train. Rosa had a six-month-old brother of her own, but even so she was full of envy of the Nureyev sisters and tremendously excited. 'We were all in ecstasies, and in the carriage there was such jubilation! It was like a holiday, with everyone happy and wanting to share in the celebration.'

Word of the event spread quickly, and for the rest of the day people crowded into the carriage to see the new arrival: Rudolf Nureyev's first audience. His birth, he would later say, was the most romantic event of his life, symbolic of his future statelessness and nomadic existence. It was to be a life lived mostly en route to places, navigated by what he called his 'vagabond soul'. To Rosa he was never Rudolf or even Rudik, its diminutive, but *Malchik kotoriy rodilsay v poezde* said in one breath as a name: the-boy-who-was-born-on-a-train.

The order for the soldiers' families to leave had come suddenly. Almost full term in her pregnancy, Farida Nureyeva knew she was taking a risk by travelling at this stage, but she had had no choice. For the last two months, Farida and Ekaterina, Rosa's mother, had regularly gone together to the authorities to find out when they were going to be permitted to join their husbands, who were serving in the Red Army's Far Eastern Division. One delay had followed another until at last, at the beginning of March 1938, the wives were told that a military train would be leaving that night.

The children were asleep by the time the trucks arrived, and after waking them and bundling them in blankets, Farida left the barracks of Alkino, her home for the past nine months, and started for the station in Ufa, about forty kilometres away, where the train was waiting. There were two carriages set aside for the women and children, and a special wagon for their luggage. The compartments opened straight on to the corridor without the privacy of doors, but they were clean and quite comfortable, with an unoccupied single row of bunks on the opposite side, which all the children on the train immediately converted into a play area. 'It was the best of times! There was such a spirit of adventure and excitement.' Most of the wives were young, already friends, and delighted to be going to their husbands, whom they hadn't seen for several months. They were all very kind and solicitous towards Farida, making sure she had everything she needed, and each day one of the two doctors on board would come and check up on her.

The train travelled at varying speeds, sometimes racketing along, sometimes stopping for hours while waiting to be hooked up to another engine. At stations there was usually a straggle of *babushki* selling little piles of wares – spring onions, pickled gherkins, curds, smoked fish – but the women rarely bought anything, as the soldiers appointed to take care of them brought them provisions as well as hot water for tea and for washing. The children would have liked to get out and run along the platform, but their mothers were reluctant to let them go: they never knew when the train was going to leave. After nearly two weeks of travelling, everyone was growing restless. 'Is the Far East far?' became the children's endless refrain. 'That's why the day the little boy was born stuck in the memory. Given all the monotony, expectation and boredom, you couldn't forget such an event in a lifetime.'

Rudolf Nureyev was 'shaken out of the womb' as the train ran alongside Lake Baikal around midday on 17 March 1938. Farida was euphoric. Not only was the baby born safely, but at last she had the son her husband longed for. When the train stopped in Ulan-Ude, she asked one of the women to accompany her eldest daughter, also called Rosa, a solemn, responsible girl, to send a telegram to her husband, Hamet, with the news, even though she felt sure he wouldn't believe it. Once before, when her second daughter, Lilia, was born, Farida had sent word that she had given birth to a boy – 'She lied because she longed to make him happy,' Rudolf wrote in his memoir. It is far more likely, however, that as Hamet's work kept him away for long periods, her motive was to persuade him to return to their village. If so, it worked. 'Overjoyed, Father came home on leave as soon as he could and found out that the "boy" was Lida [Lilia]. He was speechless and utterly miserable.'

By 1938 Farida had been married to Hamet for nearly nine years, although they had spent much of that time apart. When they first met, in the city of Kazan in the late twenties, he was still a student, studying Tatar philology and the new ideology of Communism at the academy there. He was not then the rigid army officer he later became, but a debonair young man full of ambition and ideals. A studio portrait of Hamet at twenty-five, dressed in pinstripe trousers, dress shirt and bow tie, shows him sitting at a café table with an equally handsome friend, cigarette in hand; they look like a pair of Parisian *flâneurs*. Two years younger than Hamet and also of slight build, Farida herself was extremely attractive, with long sleek black hair parted in the middle, and dark round eyes. She rarely laughed, but

had a quiet sense of humour that showed in her wry, closed smile: 'It came from inside as in a Rembrandt picture.' Although she had no education, she was bright and, like Hamet, self-confident and proud, giving relatives the impression that they both considered themselves a touch above their families.

The couple could not have chosen a more romantic place for their courtship than Kazan, with its elegant arcades and parks, and its skyline of minarets. There was a summer theatre, a bandstand and chairs, the beautiful fountain encircled with birch trees in the Lyadskoy Gardens, and the limestone-white kremlin on the hill from which one could look down at the boats far below on the Kazanka River. They both retained their nostalgia for the city, and years later would sing such Kazakh duets together as the 'Tower of Kazan', a plaintive ballad about the Tatar queen who chose to jump to her death from its upper terrace rather than forsake her birthplace. Before the revolution, Kazan had ninety-one houses of worship – monasteries, mosques and cathedrals – but by 1928, when Hamet and Farida were living there, many had been demolished by the Bolsheviks or were being used as administrative and storage buildings. Although brought up as Muslims – Hamet's father was a mullah – both were now party members, having been more than willing to exchange their religious beliefs for faith in the Communist regime. For them, as Rudolf said, the revolution was 'a miracle', opening up the possibility of educating themselves and sending their children to university, an opportunity previously undreamed of by peasant families.

Tugulbay, where Farida was born in 1905, was a large, relatively wealthy Tatar village near Kazan. Most households had a cow, but her parents, the Agilivulyevni, were poor, as there were four daughters and only one son to work the land. Farida's brother, Valiula, was fifteen years older than she, and when their mother and father died during the typhus epidemic, he took her and her three sisters – Gafia, Gandalip and Sharide – to live with his family in the city. Valiula's second wife, who was much younger than her husband, resented the sudden arrival of the four girls and loaded them with domestic chores. He, on the other hand, was kind and caring, and did everything he could to make them happy. Valiula had a phonograph and encouraged his sisters to sing and dance, and he sent them to school. Farida received an elementary education, learning to read and write in Arabic (but not in Russian), and left with no special qualifications. At first she worked for her sister-in-law as a nanny, but there was a good deal of conflict between them. Then, in the early twenties, during the period of NEP – the

New Economic Policy, which encouraged private enterprise – Valiula opened a bakery-restaurant near the Kirov Gardens, where all the sisters helped out. They loved being there: it meant that they were never hungry, and sometimes there were so many relatives sitting at the tables that there was no room for customers. Farida became an excellent cook, producing *kabartmi* (fried round cakes) from salty dough, and mastering the technique of making *pelmeni,* a type of dumpling, which remained her speciality. She was, her family claims, 'very good at attracting customers', and would stand at the stall outside the restaurant singing out her wares to passersby. One of them might well have been twenty-five-year-old Hamet Nureyev, who claimed to have fallen in love with Farida 'because of her good looks and sweet musical voice'.

In his Bashkirian village of Asanova, Hamet was known as Nuriakhamet Nuriakhametovich Fasliyev, the son of Nuriakhamet Fasliyevich Fasliyev. Saying he 'wanted to be different', he chose to use the shortened 'Hamet' and to combine his patronym with his surname when he left for the city. As children he and his brother, Nurislam, attended the local madrassa until 1917, when the Bolsheviks closed it down, at which point fourteen-year-old Hamet went to the village school for the next four years. His father, although no longer permitted to hold services, and forced to work in the fields, continued to be thought of as the mullah by the locals, most of whom still observed Muslim traditions and festivals.

With their two sons and three daughters – Saima, Fatima and Jamila – the Fasliyevs lived in a long narrow wooden *isba* at the edge of the village, the largest house in Asanova. It was a comfortable existence, with animals in the barns and rows of vegetables growing in the backyard. Across the dusty road was the Karmazan River, where the children spent so much of their time, swimming and fishing all summer in the bend where the water was deep and clean, and skating when it iced over in the winter months. During these long dark evenings the family gathered for music sessions, singing folk songs and dancing to Hamet's accompaniment on the accordion or harmonica. Sometimes, on a fine day, he sat on a bench outside the house and played for the local children, who sat cross-legged or danced around him.

In contrast to their neighbours, many of whom were illiterate, the Fasliyevs were one of the most educated families in the village. The siblings were encouraged to work hard, which Hamet did obsessively: 'Studying was his passion.' In 1921, when the famine years began, the school was shut down and the sole priority became the search for

food. Asanova's mortality rate rose by the day; some villagers were forced to exist on *libeda*, a kind of gruel made from grass. Hamet had no choice but to join the workers in the fields until conditions improved. By 1925 he was working as an *isbach* in charge of the village club, organizing lectures on political issues, stocking the small library with propagandist literature, and arranging social evenings with dances and films. All the same he was restless. At twenty-two, he knew there was nothing but a peasant's life for him in Asanova, which to this day remains a backward village of primitive shacks. He felt he had to escape; young people were migrating to the cities to work, and Hamet wanted to be one of them. Kazan, the Tatar capital, a centre of science, culture, industry and commerce, was the obvious place to go. Deciding that military life was where his future lay, Hamet joined Kazan's cavalry school as a private in charge of horses; but either too impatient or too proud to work his way up through the ranks, he left after two years to continue his studies, enrolling at the Tatar Academy.

Farida, who met him at this time, had set her heart on going to the teachers' training college on the wide boulevard of Gruzinskaya Street, and when she married Hamet in May 1929 he promised her that after his course was completed it would be her turn to study. By the end of that year, however, Farida was pregnant, and by the following summer they had left Kazan for good. It had begun to look as if the promise the city had offered them had failed. Following the arrest in 1928 of Sultan Galiev, a prominent supporter of Muslim Communism appointed by Stalin, a number of other leaders of the republic – teachers, intellectuals and writers – were being prosecuted. Tatar autonomy was under threat and, uneasy about the outcome, Hamet decided to take his new wife back to his village. Stalin had just announced a radical switch from individual peasant farming to mass collectivization, and seeing in the changes an opportunity for self-advancement, Hamet volunteered himself as a senior worker in the Karmazan *kolkhoz,* Asanova's state farm.

It is not possible, as Robert Conquest has written in *The Harvest of Sorrow*, to separate collectivization from the savage policy of *dekulakization*, which took place at the same time. Those who had worked hard through NEP and managed to buy a horse or a cow were now branded *kulaks*, an enemy class that Stalin set out to liquidate (sixty-three per cent of these peasant families were either shot, imprisoned or deported). In Asanova, a poor village, there were no arrests, although locals still remember one rich landowner – 'The last

capitalist!' according to eighty-five-year-old Hamza Usman Ula – in the Bayor forest who had hired paid workers and suddenly disappeared. Ula, a 'Son of Stalin', as he still calls himself, remembers Hamet's return and his attempts to persuade people of the benefits of collectivization. For many peasants it was abhorrent to have to hand over land, animals and equipment to the state. Their only resistance was violence, and throughout the country hundreds of murders and terrorist acts took place, many people choosing to destroy their livestock and crops rather than enter the *kolkhoz*. Even though few Asanova inhabitants were party members, Hamet, who along with two fellow villagers had been appointed proselytizers, found that he faced no serious opposition: 'People liked him,' Ula said. 'He was smart and he knew how to talk to people.'

By the autumn of 1930 Farida was pregnant again: her studying days were over before they had even begun. Hamet, however, was determined to continue. After working for eighteen months in a regional insurance office to earn enough money to support the family, he enrolled at the highest Communist *kolkhoz* school in the city of Ufa, about sixty kilometres away, for a three-year course in agriculture, eventually taking charge of his group. As Hamet's work often took him to other villages in the area, Farida was left to bring up their children alone. He was away one dreadful day when the new baby, Lilia, developed meningitis, and she lost her hearing because Farida was unable to get her to a doctor in time. 'It was March or April and the roads were mud. How could she have walked ten kilometres from Asanova to Kushnarenkova with two small girls?' remarks Lilia's daughter, Alfia. 'It was Hamet's fault,' she told me. 'She never forgave him for it.' As if acknowledging his culpability, Hamet was always especially tender towards Lilia, his favourite daughter, whom he would never punish. He was a good man who loved his wife and children, but his family was never his priority. Driven to succeed, he was becoming increasingly involved in local politics, and from 1935 to 1937 he worked as a political instructor for a party department in the Nurimanovsky region.

Over the next two years the Terror intensified. Along with the mass repression, and the murders and arrests of leading writers and scholars, Stalin and the NKVD struck at the best cadres of the Red Army, destroying tens of thousands of loyal commanders and commissars. These enormous losses were Hamet's gain. Profiting from the decimation of the military high command, he was among a second wave of recruits with the most basic military training to be appointed as *politruks,* a

type of thought police employed by battalions to instil ideological orthodoxy in the men. A staunch Communist, competent worker and extremely popular leader, Hamet was ideal for the job. He could even draw on his religious upbringing. 'We were like priests,' a former *politruk* explains. 'The goals were the same. You had to communicate and inspire, take care of people's spirits.' Hamet began by working in an artillery unit, and within a year was promoted to senior *politruk* and sent to the Soviet-Manchurian border. Badly affected by the purges, the Special Army of the Far East was now increasing its numbers to deal with the recent deterioration of relations between Russia and Japan.

The greatest number of the new gulags were in the Russian Far East. It was there that 'enemies of the nation' were sent, herded by the hundreds into the infamous Stolypin penal wagons bound for Vladivostok. Following the very track along which Rudolf was born were the shaven-headed women of car number 7, stricken with dysentery, scurvy and malnutrition and rationed to a mug of water a day, whom Eugenia Ginzburg describes so powerfully in *Journey into the Whirlwind*. Their destination was a prison camp, to which they were marched by brutal guards in ranks of five, whereas Farida and the Ufa women and children ended their journey at Razdolnoye, a small town near the Chinese border, where they were met by a jubilant group of soldiers – the husbands and fathers who were waiting on the platform to welcome them.

Not far from the station up a main highway was a military settlement where the Nureyevs were billeted, sharing with several other families a long, single-storey building, which for some reason was known as 'Under the Roofs of Paris', after the film (and eponymous song) *Sous les toits de Paris*. The children loved Razdolnoye, which had a park where they could sleep out in hammocks on hot nights, an open-air cinema, and special activities organized for them by the army. Several families had portable phonographs ('pettiphones', they were called), and in summer with all the windows opened wide, in every corner of the camp the latest popular tunes were played – probably the first music the infant Rudik heard. It was a comfortable, cocooned existence, with only an occasional hint of the horrors taking place around them. 'Another musician or singer would be arrested and then we'd have to stop playing his records.' That summer in Vladivostok, where Farida once took the girls as a treat to shop for dolls, the poet Osip Mandelstam lay in a transit camp half demented and dying of starvation.

The hostilities between Russia and Japan were just beginning. In July, Hamet left his family for two months to join his battalion in defending a hill above Lake Khasan. This successful rout of the Japanese was directed by Marshal Vasily Blyukher, commander-in-chief of the Far Eastern Front, who immediately afterwards was mystifyingly arrested and shot on Stalin's orders. These were dangerously unpredictable times. Although Hamet remained with his artillery regiment for another year, he spent much of his time working on ways to get a transfer. 'He wanted the family to go to Moscow. He wanted that for Lilia.'

In Razdolnoye there was a kindergarten where Lilia was able to participate in games and communicate with the children in a sign language of sorts, but there was no school in the region that would accept children with disabilities; the only specialized institution for the deaf was in Moscow. Farida later told Rudolf that it had been her dream to educate her children in the capital – 'She wanted us to go to better schools and eventually to university' – and she was ecstatic when Hamet's request was granted. 'My mother wished that we had a Russian education. She even forbade my father to speak Tatar with us. That way it happened that, although paternally and maternally being Tatars, we spoke exclusively Russian.'

In August 1939 the family, this time accompanied by their father, set off once again on the long rail journey through the Urals and on to Moscow. Hamet began work immediately as a *politruk* in the artillery school on Horoshevskoye Street, opposite which they had settled into a small second-floor room. Over the next two years – the most stable period of Rudolf's early childhood – the baby would be lulled to sleep by the sound of trains rattling along the track beyond the back fence. As Hamet's work was so close to home, the soldiers became part of the family, playing with the children and sometimes smuggling the sisters under their coats into the local cinema. But such well-being was short-lived. In June 1941, when Hitler invaded Russia, Hamet was sent to the Western Front, and the military families were ordered to evacuate the city immediately. His division went on to help mount one of the most spectacularly successful counter-attacks in history: the defence of Moscow, for which, despite his lack of military experience, Hamet was decorated for bravery.

Although told to leave Moscow with only essentials, by turning a metal washtub into a makeshift trunk Farida even managed to fit in their samovar. She and the children were billeted in the village of

Shuchye, at the foot of the Ural Mountains, where they were given the most basic accommodation, sharing a room in a primitive *isba* with an old Russian couple who still clung to their Orthodox beliefs. Rudolf's first memories were of being gently shaken awake at dawn by the man or his wife, and led to kneel in front of an icon of the Virgin, kept constantly lit by an oil lamp: 'The peasants there gave me potatoes when I prayed with them, sweet, frozen potatoes. My poor mother suffered when she saw me . . . Brought up as a Muslim she had to watch her son praying to an icon in order to get something to eat.'

These were the years Rudolf called his 'potato period', a time defined by hunger, cold and loneliness. The winter of 1941 was one of the coldest on record, with snow piled up in dirty mountains on either side of the village lane, a 'narrow, frightening path' on which he played with no companions, games or toys. Almost everything had been left behind in Moscow, and except for a set of coloured pencils and paper animals Farida had bought to comfort him after he burned himself on their Primus stove, Rudolf had no possessions he could call his own – a deprivation he never forgot.

In 1942 Hamet, now serving as commissar of a mine battalion, arranged for the family to move into his brother Nurislam's apartment in Ufa. This small industrial town, the capital of Bashkiria, was just beginning to expand as factories (producing mostly arms and military equipment) were being moved there from Moscow and Leningrad as a safety precaution during the war. Today the city sprawls from the old centre along six-lane Stalinist boulevards as far as what used to be the town of Chernikovsk and incorporating Glumilino, the village in between. When the Nureyev family arrived it was rare to see a car in Ufa, and only the main roads were paved with asphalt; Sverdlova Street, where they lived first, was a muddy half-cobbled lane with single- or two-storey *isbas* backing on to a yard, characteristic of the old quarters of many Russian towns.

Although picturesque from the outside with their lacy, pastel blue wooden shutters, these little log cabins made grim dwellings: dark and cramped. Their second-floor 'apartment' was a room nine metres square, but at least they had it to themselves, as Nurislam was away at the front and his family was living elsewhere. Soon, though, Farida was able to find more spacious accommodation around the corner on Zentsova Street, where they also had more light as there were two windows facing the street and two more overlooking the yard. Remembering the kitchen and outside lavatory shared with eight other families, Rudolf was appalled in retrospect by the conditions in

which he spent his childhood: 'Six people and a dog, all in one room. At night I could never stretch out completely and during the day I pretended for hours to read something, but I couldn't with everybody watching me.' On the other hand, communal habitation was the life most people knew, and it had its compensations. 'These days you don't know the name of your neighbour, but before we used to live as one family. If somebody needed something they would come and ask; if there was sorrow in one family it was sorrow for all families; if a letter arrived from the war it would be joy for the whole house.'

Everyone had approximately the same amount of money except for the Nureyevs: 'When the family first moved in they had nothing. Just an old wooden bed with a cloth on top and one blanket. Some of the neighbours tried to help and made a mattress for them by stuffing fabric with straw.' Farida was a fanatical housekeeper all the same, so fastidious that despite prizing every morsel of food, she would still cut off the outside of the bread and discard it, aware from her own experience of the unsanitary conditions of bakeries. Later they acquired a table made of planks that became the focal point of their life. For Rudolf, though, there was nothing cosily familial about these days, but only hardship and constant hunger:

> I remember those endless six-month-long winters in Ufa without light and almost no food. I remember, too, Mother trudging off in the snow to bring back a few pounds of potatoes on which we were to live for a week . . . When Mother had gone off on one of her exhausting trips in search of something to eat . . . my sisters and I would crawl into bed and try to sleep. We had sold everything we possessed and everything we could possibly exchange for food: my father's civilian clothes, his belts, his braces, his boots.

It was to Asanova that Farida made regular excursions on foot, a gruelling trek of sixty kilometres, but worth every step, as the Fasliyevs were generous with their crops and livestock, and would either share what they had or exchange food for army coupons. Setting off at around five in the morning, she would tow an empty sled behind her, hoping to have a sack full of provisions for the journey home – mostly potatoes but often flour, milk, eggs and once even a goose. The landscape, especially in winter, was drearily monotonous, its endless horizon broken occasionally by hamlets of brightly painted *isbi* surrounded by picket fences. When she reached the Podimalovsky Forest, notorious for its bandits, she would wait at the edge for a group of

people to arrive, then cross it with them, as it was far too dangerous to pass through alone. At nightfall once, in a wood near the village, Farida noticed what she thought at first were fireflies all around, then realized they were the yellow-blue eyes of animals moving slowly towards her: she was encircled by wolves. Grabbing the blanket she had brought along to stop the potatoes from freezing, Farida set it alight, scaring the creatures away.

Arriving at last at the track that leads to Asanova, she counted the telegraph poles to see how much longer the journey would take – there were twenty per kilometre – and as she approached the family house would see the eager faces of her nieces and nephews waiting at the window. 'Farida-*apa* is here! *Ura!*' they would cry, running out to greet her. In summer Rudolf and his sisters often accompanied Farida – the only holiday they ever had. Madim, Hamet's mother, would prepare the house for their arrival, sluicing the floors so that they were cool and fresh, and ensuring that there was always plenty to eat, even meat for shashliks. The children slept on the big veranda or in the barns scented with sweet drying grass, and spent whole days on the river until they were gypsy-brown, swimming and throwing bread to net little fish they brought back for supper.

By 1943 Rudik, age five, was old enough to go to kindergarten, which meant that Farida could get a job. She had been ashamed when her son, whom she had carried on her back to school as he had no shoes, had been teased by the other children and called *bomsch*, the Tatar word for 'beggar'. She began working in the local factory that produced ice cream and *kefir* (a yoghurt drink), but was obliged to race back during her lunch break to provide a midday meal for her family, still dressed in her uniform of blue smock, white headscarf and rubber boots. (The factory floor was awash with water, causing the arthritis from which she suffered for the rest of her life.) The only perk was having access to ice cream wafers, which she and a couple of the other women occasionally managed to smuggle through the bars of the windows to their children. 'If their supervisor had caught them they would have got five years in prison,' said Federat Musin, who remembers standing waiting under the window with Rudik.

Farida was prepared to take the risk since they were still desperately short of food. 'Before the end of the war we really had *nothing* to eat,' Rudolf remembered. He once fainted from hunger at school, and to earn extra roubles, he collected old newspapers or used bottles, which he washed and sold back to the shop. When Hamet sent the family European chocolate from the front, Farida ground it into cocoa to sell

at the market. Life was a bitter struggle, but Farida was determined that the children would have the best she could give them. 'In great poverty still you create a sense of luxury. Mother said I was very sensitive as a child. She never wanted me to see unpleasant things. She saw that I reacted badly to something ugly.'

For a New Year's Eve treat Farida bought a single ticket for the ballet, hoping to find a way to smuggle her whole family inside. At the entrance to Ufa's red-brick opera house, all five found themselves pushed through the doors by an impatient, elbowing crowd, and in the confusion were driven right into the auditorium. Even before the overture began, Rudolf was mesmerized; the wonder of the theatre's crystal chandeliers, stuccoed interior, classical murals and velvet curtains patterned with coloured dancing lights transported him at once from the grey world he knew. 'And then the gods came dancing.' *Song of the Cranes*, a three-act work based on a popular national tale about a bird-woman pursued by a hunter, is Bashkiria's *Swan Lake*. The star that night was Zaituna Nazretdinova, Ufa's own prima ballerina, her feminine, folksy movements in spectacular contrast to those of the charismatic leader of the hunters, who ends his solo by draining a bottle and flinging it off the stage. The drama seemed to speak directly to the seven-year-old, who felt utterly possessed and somehow 'called'. 'I knew. That's it, that's my life, that will be my function. I wanted to be *everything* onstage.'

By May 1945 the war in Europe was over and Russian soldiers began returning home. Full of excitement, Farida and the children went to meet the first train from the front, scanning the faces of the uniformed men in the crowd, but Hamet was not among them. They went back to the station again and again, feeling more despondent each time, until at last a letter arrived from Hamet saying that he was staying in Germany and would soon be sending for them. He was then working as a deputy commander helping to repatriate Soviet citizens – a welcome respite, however anticlimactic, from the action in which he had been involved. His rifle division had formed part of the Second Belorussian Front, which advanced across the Oder River, marching through Poland to the frontier, and helped to bring about Russia's victory over Germany. (For his 'battle merits' throughout these military operations, Hamet received two medals.)

As *politruk* of a battalion he was expected to be a leader. 'You ran in front of the soldiers shouting, "For Stalin! The Motherland!" secretly praying to God as the bombs crashed round you.' Loved by his

soldiers, he not only inspired them to fight more bravely but acted as a confidant, listening to their problems and needs. His easy camaraderie shines out in a photograph in which he sits in a field surrounded by smiling comrades, one of whom, no more than a teenager, is playing the accordion. In another picture the boy is accompanying a comically stiff group of waltzing uniformed men, an event that Hamet, a keen amateur photographer, is likely to have captured himself on film as well as choreographed, as he made it part of his job to arrange *samodeyatelnost* – singing and dancing groups.

It was allowing himself to become too close to his men that led to Hamet becoming involved in a party in Poland that got out of hand. Brought up as a Muslim, he was unlikely to have been drunk himself, but was nevertheless held responsible and given a strict reprimand. This, combined with the offence – foreshadowing his son's future behaviour in Paris in 1961 – of 'communicating with foreigners' (socializing with Polish soldiers), led to his demotion from the rank of major. In August 1946, having worked for a year as a senior instructor in the political department of a 'capturing brigade' of the army, Hamet discovered that he was being retired. A character report cited, 'He has a general education, but not a special military one, which badly affects his work. In addition, his knowledge of Russian is poor.' Hamet's sudden discharge following his demotion was a humiliating blow, completely negating the medals he had won. It was a disillusioned and bitter man who returned to Ufa that summer to a family to whom he was virtually a stranger.

Except for a postcard he received from the front – 'My dear son Rudik! I'm saying hello to everybody, Rosa, Razida, Lilia, and Mama. I'm alive and healthy, Your father, Nureyev' – Rudolf had had no contact with Hamet, and held no childhood memories of him. His first impression was of 'a severe, very powerful man with a strong chin and a heavy jaw-line – an unknown force that rarely smiled, rarely spoke and who scared me'. Surrounded from birth by females, Rudolf had had no man in his life until then: both his grandfathers were dead, his uncle was at war, and so were most of the men in the neighbourhood. Suddenly he found himself supplanted in the household as the only male, and subjected to a whole new set of curfews and rules.

It was hard for Rudolf to obey and respect a man who had allowed his family to go hungry, and there was something comical as well as intimidating about his father's punctilious military manner. Every evening when he came back from his job as a security guard in a factory, Hamet took off his cap with his left hand and raked his hair with

his right, staring straight ahead and never smiling. The ritual was always the same. On the other hand, Rudolf, like his sisters, felt awkwardly in awe of Hamet and wasn't able to look him directly in the eye. When the children addressed him they would use the formal *vy* rather than *ty* (the equivalents of the French *vous* and *tu*), which clearly hurt him. 'I told him it was because we hadn't seen him for eight years,' said Razida.

With his immense pride in having a son, Hamet came back from the war 'wanting to find a pal'. On their first outing together he took Rudolf shooting, hoping to impress him with the Belgian gun that had been given to him as a present by his Red Army superiors. 'He was so proud of it and would lend it to nobody,' remarked a fellow hunter. When Rudolf started lagging behind, Hamet decided to go on ahead and told his son to wait for him with the gear. Never having been alone in the forest, Rudolf was terrified. 'Suddenly I saw a woodpecker who scared me and ducks flying in and out . . . I started to say, "Papa, Papa, Mama, Mama."' Hamet laughed when he came back and heard all the wailing – the eight-year-old clearly needed toughening up – but Farida was furious when she learned about the incident. She could never forget her experience with the wolves.

Hamet's idea of male bonding was the traditional Bashkirian one of hunting and sitting around a campfire telling stories, all of which Rudolf found 'very uncomfortable'. Razida was more interested than her brother in hearing about Hamet's experiences in the war. He was not a man of many words – an army officer in Russia's political climate at the time was obliged to be taciturn – but occasionally a tale would emerge about how he had carried a hand grenade across the river Oder or how a German tank had targeted him, circling round and round. Given his gift for communicating with his comrades, it was distressing for Hamet to discover that he was not able to relate to his son. He began taking his nephew Rais hunting instead. What he could not know was that dance, already a fixation for Rudolf, would cause a far greater rift between them.

At kindergarten Rudolf, like most children, had learned folk dancing, immediately showing the kind of energy and spirit demanded by Bashkirian dance, and shining enough to be chosen as one of the soloists in school performances. 'From early years I knew how to be onstage and how to command it,' he said. Some concerts took place in Ufa's hospitals, where Rudolf and his little troupe were sent to entertain the wounded soldiers – an experience vividly rendered in Colum McCann's Nureyev novel, *Dancer*:

> In the spaces between the beds the children performed . . . they sank to their knees and then they rose and shouted and clapped their hands . . . Just when we thought they were finished, a small blond boy stepped out of the line. He was about five or six years old. He extended his leg, placed his hands firmly on his hips and hitched his thumbs at his back . . . the soldiers in their beds propped themselves up. Those by the windows shaded their eyes to watch. The boy went to the floor for a squatting dance . . . When he finished the ward was full of applause. Someone offered the boy a cube of sugar. He blushed and slipped it into the top of his sock . . . By the time he finishes so many cubes of sugar are stuffed lumpily inside his socks that the patients laugh about his legs being diseased. He is given vegetable scraps and bread that the soldiers have set aside, and he crams them into a small paper bag to bring home.

It was when Rudolf moved to School Number Two, about a year before his father's return, that his real potential was spotted. A soloist from the theatre who came to give a course in dancing saw Rudolf and arranged a sailor's hornpipe especially for him, saying that he should go to the House of Teachers, a social club outside Ufa, where one of the classes was taught by a woman said to have been 'from the circle around Diaghilev', and who was, as Rudolf later remarked, '*almost* a real ballet teacher'.

Anna Ivanovna Udeltsova's studio on the outskirts of Ufa was a large hall with no mirrors, a barre made from a row of cinema chairs, and a stage at one end. It was there that Rudolf auditioned for her, performing a Ukranian *gopek* with emphatic arm movements, side kicks and big jumps, followed by a *lezghinka*, a Caucasian showstopper in which men, wearing supple boots, traditionally dance on pointe, with turned-in legs and fisted hands. Building up to a climax of turns and multiple falls on to the knee, the eight-year-old Rudolf stunned Udeltsova, who told him in her strange falsetto voice that he had a duty to himself to learn classical ballet, and must work toward joining the students of the Maryinsky Theatre in St Petersburg.

She began giving him ballet lessons twice a week, which immediately became the centre of his existence. 'Class was extraordinary ritual. All unpleasant things vanished.' Taking Rudolf under her wing, Udeltsova tidied him up, getting him to wash his hands and damp down his tousled hair before starting at the barre, and was soon casting him as the lead in her concerts. Even at this stage there was a feminine softness to his movements, leading a few parents to comment that it was only his costume that distinguished him as a boy. Nevertheless he

was warmly praised for his talent, and sometimes given chocolates by a doting *babushka*. Often Udeltsova paired him with a ten-year-old girl called Valya, although neither felt comfortable about their dancing together.

> At school boys and girls studied separately so we were ashamed to be seen mixing with each other but, Rudolf so loved dancing that he was happy to do anything Anna Ivanovna wanted. We stayed behind sometimes to work on our duet but never spoke to each other and would leave the House of Teachers in silence, going our separate ways.

All the same, they were often teased about being 'a couple' by the other girls, who resented their special treatment. They would lie in wait for Rudolf before class, hiding behind snowdrifts until they saw him coming, then pelt him with snowballs and roll him in the snow while shrieking with laughter. 'Anna Ivanovna knew what was going on and scolded the girls, but it happened again and again.' Converting her students' behaviour into dance, Udeltsova invented a duet in which Rudolf and Valya exchanged a ball and a skipping rope, which diverted them from their gaucheness, and in another piece re-created the scene in the yard by encircling Rudolf with mischievous girls from whom he had to escape. For this piece, 'Dance of the Clogs', Udeltsova had somehow found authentic wooden clogs for the whole group. 'She was so inspired with ideas for ballets and so much in love with Rudolf that she made all his costumes herself.' For an arcadian shepherd's dance, Udeltsova kitted Rudolf out in breeches, a fitted jacket, and an eighteenth-century-style wig, and in the romantic 'Winter Fairy Tale', her homage to *The Nutcracker*, he played a prince who chose Valya, the prettiest snowflake, as a partner. In the end he was left alone onstage, opening his eyes and realizing it had all been a beautiful vision – the feeling Rudolf himself experienced each time he returned to his everyday Ufa life.

At first Rudolf had loved 'real school', and because of his unusually retentive memory, was one of its top pupils. 'I don't remember him being a brat like the other boys. He was outstanding for his obedience. If he had to go somewhere, participate in something, he would always ask permission in advance.' Geography, literature and physics were his favourite subjects, and he enjoyed the English lessons given by a woman who had studied at Cambridge, but once Rudolf had fallen under the spell of dancing, his school grades began to deteriorate and he became pensive and withdrawn.