

Lost Princess Found: A Story of Resurrection

The window of the Trans-Siberian railway car was buffeted repeatedly by the sweeping winds as Sofia stared out at vast expanses of forests, rolling hills, and wide-open steppes that make up the Russian countryside, her thoughts turning to the life she left behind. Two years earlier, her coach ticket would have been first-class, featuring a portrait of her father, and tucked inside the silk-lined pocket of a princess. Today, it bore the hammer and sickle the Bolsheviks had adopted as the national symbol and was stuffed in the threadbare pocket of a Soviet citizen.

Sofia was not her real name. That was the name the White Army gave her and put on her forged passport. She was on the run, desperate to remain inconspicuous as she tried to get out of the country.

“Why did that man look at me for so long? Did the woman talking to the police on the train platform recognize me?” These were the kind of questions that reeled over and over again in her head. Paranoia and panic had become her constant companions these last three months. Yet, Anastasia Romanov had to “project calm and stay as inconspicuous as possible” as she had been instructed by Yuri, her White Army handler. The “Whites” were the opposition fighting the Bolshevik Red Army in the Russian Civil War.

Seventeen-year-old Anastasia, and Yuri, who was maybe thirty years old, had boarded the train in the Siberian city of Yekaterinburg, but sat in different coach cars. As the steam billowed simultaneously from beneath and above the Cherepanov series locomotive, and its steel wheels began to move at first very slowly, then ever more quickly, Anastasia left behind the chaos and horror of her family’s execution, ordered by the new Soviet government headed by Vladimir Lenin. She then spent three alarming months in a nearby safe house run by the Whites, as the Red Army and Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka, searched for her. They wanted to extinguish the royal line forever, which they almost did on that terrible 17th of July 1918.

As the train rattled rhythmically eastward along the tracks from the city where her family had been exiled and placed under house arrest before being murdered, Anastasia was called back, however morosely, to the ornate warmth of the Moscow and St. Petersburg rail stations that had been the starting point for so many of her fondest memories traveling west to Europe as a child with her family. Yuri and the Whites had her heading away from Europe, where the Bolsheviks were scouring the countryside and cities for her, into the drab, November cold of Siberia toward the Sea of Japan.

Born the youngest daughter into imperial Russian royalty and a life of extraordinary luxury and privilege in the Peterhof complex of palaces in St. Petersburg to the last emperor of Russia, Czar Nicholas II and Czarina Alexandra, Anastasia was named for the fourth-century martyr St. Anastasia, whose name means “resurrection.”

Her very name had become an allusion central to her life, having survived the massacre in the Yekaterinburg basement by the luck of having the hail of bullets that killed the rest of her family ricochet off royal jewels secretly sewn into her corset. During that terror, she acted quickly by smearing her mother’s blood upon her chest and playing dead as the Cheka firing squad and guards squabbled among themselves about how best to dispose of the bodies. Finally, it was decided that the soldiers would bring the bodies to the awaiting Graford truck that would haul them to nearby Koptiyaki forest for an unceremonious burial. Those soldiers were some of the same guards who had been with the Romanovs for their ten months of captivity. When the guards, Aleksei and Illya, reached down for Anastasia, her eyes met theirs and she saw sympathy in them. She had, essentially, lived with these men for almost a year. The two guards remained silent, as if in a mixture of shame and pity, and picked up the limp body of her sister Tatiana instead. Anastasia was petrified with fear during this process, unable, until much later, to come to grips with the horror of witnessing the brutal execution of her family. Within minutes the

basement door was slammed shut and she heard the truck pull away. She was alone in a deafening, sickening silence.

Almost worse than lying still for hours in a pool of her parents and sibling's blood on the rough concrete floor was the smell of it. As it coagulated and began to turn brown, it increasingly nauseated Anastasia, which made her feel ashamed. "How did I survive? Why did I alone survive?" were the questions that repeated themselves in her mind. Relief came, though terrifying as it was, from the sound of machine gun fire outside, followed by the door above her being kicked in so violently that it almost came unhinged.

"Get up! Now!" screamed the soldier.

Anastasia was not sure if she could. She felt so weak.

"Hurry, or I will shoot you myself!" he exclaimed.

This got her moving. Before she reached the stairs, the loud soldier and another picked her up, and threw her onto the back of a waiting flatbed, horse-drawn wagon.

"Lie face down, shut up, and don't move!" barked the soldier.

The coachman, an elderly man with his wife seated next to him, stood up and threw two heavy blankets over his cargo. He made a clicking noise with his tongue and teeth, and they were off.

Anastasia's head bumped against the train's window. She had dozed off. She was hungry but skipped the dining car to avoid a crowd there and headed straight to the hopper toilet and then to her berth in the common sleeper car.

"Omsk, the next station is Omsk," was the first thing she heard when she awoke. The porter repeated himself again in a heavy voice as he walked up and down the carpeted corridor, poking his head into the cars and cabins.

She had been slowly waking up, slipping in and out of all too vivid daydreams about the months she spent in the loft of the old coachman's barn. Her days there were spent in the barn dormer listening to the bleating of sheep and grunting of hogs. After dark, she was permitted to walk on the ground floor of the barn, but never outside. Simple, always potato-based, meals were brought to her in the dark by the coachman, whose name she never learned. After the first week, Yuri had come to her one night.

"The Reds know the body count was one short in the Koptyaki forest," he said without even introducing himself. "They're looking for you. But you're lucky: the Bolsheviks want to keep it quiet and, more importantly, now you have me. If you listen to me carefully and don't ask questions, you may live for a little while longer."

"This must be how the proletariat speak," thought Anastasia. As a child, Anastasia had been sheltered from the world, kept away from ordinary people.

She was startled out of her reverie by a voice standing above her.

"Are you all right, miss?" It was a conductor, a gruff-looking man with a thick beard and piercing blue eyes.

Anastasia, feeling her heart rate rise and her mouth begin to dry out, looked up from her berth, offering a weak smile: "Yes, thank you. I was just dreaming."

The conductor raised an eyebrow and said, "The cleaning crew will be in soon, please move to the coach."

Her stomach lurched as she listened to his footsteps echoing through the silent sleeping car as he walked away. Yuri had told her to stay "inconspicuous and unnoticeable." What if the conductor had recognized her? Did he? She was having a tough time concentrating, her head in a nervous fog.

After a brief, skittish stop in the dining car for the Trans-Siberian specialty, strawberry jam on toast with tea, Anastasia headed back to her window seat in coach where her thoughts returned to her family. She remembered her father, the kind, gentle man who had been unable to save his family from their fate. She remembered her mother, who had been consumed by worry and fear in the final days of their captivity. And she remembered her sisters, Olga, Tatiana, and Maria and her precious, hemophiliac brother Alexie, who had been her closest companions.

Anastasia's thoughts were again interrupted by a sudden jolt as the train slowed quickly before shuttering to a halt. Then a hand grabbed her shoulder.

"Sofia, we are at a checkpoint just before Irkutsk station," Yuri whispered gruffly. "You know your story, it's who you are. Remain calm. If they recognize you, I will no longer help you."

Anastasia nodded. As she looked back, Yuri was gone. She pushed herself up from her seat, her eyes darting around the train car. She could see the fear and confusion on the faces of the other passengers, who were also peering out the windows, trying to determine what was happening. She heard shouting outside the train, and her heart began to race. Men in long, black coats and fur hats were telling the conductors and porters that they were scanning passengers.

"May I please see your papers, ma'am," one of the men said to Anastasia in a deep, and almost kind sounding voice.

That kindness is what worried Anastasia most. It seemed forced.

"Hello Sofia Ivanova. Where might you be going?" he asked.

"I'm just a student traveling to Vladivostok to visit my family," answered Anastasia. She knew that was a mistake. Yuri had told her not to ever offer anything more than was asked.

“I didn’t ask you what you were, but that’s good to know. The Soviet Union needs smart women,” he said. And with that, he walked away. Anastasia let out a breath she did not realize she had been holding.

She felt weak with relief as the train pulled away toward Belogarsk.

Anastasia drifted back to her early life. She was a vibrant and adventurous girl who loved to explore and discover. But her carefree childhood ended abruptly when her father abdicated the throne in March 1917, following the February Revolution, which itself had followed the Great War and the failed, but deadly, German invasion of Russia. Her family was thereafter arrested and moved to Yekaterinburg.

Even though she had only left that horrible city five days ago, she was so grateful to be eight times zones away from it now. Yuri had told her that once they reached Vladivostok, the Bolsheviks and Red Army would likely be there looking again. If they made it through, she was to walk to Moltvosk Harbor where an elderly Japanese man would be waiting for her.

“I’ll be there too, if I make it,” he said, “but the chance of both of us doing so are small.”

When the Trans-Siberian train eased into Vladivostok station, as Yuri had predicted, a large Cadre of Red Army Soldiers, Cheka, and Bolshevik apparatchiks were there to greet it. Sofia’s paperwork was deemed “in order,” and she made her way to the harbor. There were many elderly Japanese fishermen there, but one was looking for someone. Fuyuhira was a kind man who helped Anastasia to the lower quarters of his fishing boat to sleep. He told her that the crossing to Japan might be a little rough, but that she was now safe. When Anastasia asked him where Yuri was, he handed her a note:

“My dearest Princess Anastasia, would be Czarina of our beloved Motherland: if you are reading this, it means that the Reds have caught me. My life has been one lived on the edge, and all lives lived as such end early. I have dedicated myself humbly to the royal family and you.

God speed my princess.” The tears that Anastasia, for reasons of self-preservation, had denied herself, now flowed.