



Un enfant de sang chrétien

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Edmund LEVIN

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Présentation de l'éditeur

C'est un plaisir rare que cette brillante reconstitution historique doublée d'un polar haletant qui remet en lumière une histoire infamante trop longtemps occultée, une effroyable injustice, dont il est important de prendre conscience : l'affaire Beilis – l'affaire Dreyfus de la Russie tsariste.

Simon Sebag Montefiore, auteur des *Romanov, 1613-1918*

À Kiev, entre 1911 et 1913.

Un jour de Mars 1911, le cadavre d'un garçon de treize ans est retrouvé dans une grotte d'un quartier déshérité de Kiev. L'enfant est à demi-nu, son corps est lardé de 47 coups de couteau.

L'Ukraine est alors intégrée à la Russie tsariste et sa population juive soumise aux mêmes règles de ségrégation, interdictions de séjour et humiliations permanentes. Dans ce contexte, les Black Hundreds, organisation violemment antisémite, relancent une vieille rumeur qui voudrait qu'à l'approche des Pâques, les Juifs sacrifient des enfants chrétiens pour mêler leur sang au pain azyme. Et c'est ainsi qu'un coupable est désigné : Mandel Beilis. Ce père de trois enfants, modeste et timide, ouvrier à la briqueterie voisine mène une vie paisible, mais il est Juif.

Le procès commence et ce qui deviendra l'affaire Beilis va prendre un retentissement extraordinaire, mobilisant bientôt tout ce que le Monde compte de Lumières, de Thomas Mann à H.G. Wells, en passant par l'archevêque de Canterbury, Jane Addams, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle ou Anatole France.

Et pendant ce temps, une femme jubile, Vera Cheberyak, machiavélique chef de gang, ravie de voir l'attention de l'opinion se détourner de ses propres activités sanguinaires...

Extrait

1

“Why Should I Be Afraid?”

Two boys were looking for buried treasure.

Early in the afternoon of March 20, 1911, a pair of gymnasium students of twelve or thirteen set off to explore the Berner Estate, a scruffy piece of wilderness adjoining the Lukianovka neighborhood on the northern outskirts of Kiev. A dozen or so acres in size, strewn with mysterious mounds, ruts, and ravines and dotted with brush, the Berner Estate had an outstanding feature irresistible to adventurous boys: its numerous caves. The caves had been uncovered accidentally by road workers some six decades earlier, causing considerable excitement among archaeologists and would-be treasure hunters. According to legend, treasure grounds were distinguished by unusual rock formations such as the ones found on the estate. A local landowner, convinced that the caves harbored the lost trove of an early eighteenth-century Cossack leader, ordered an intensive search back in the 1850s.

Treasure was said to be watched over by vengeful guardian spirits, but if the men obeying the landowner's command were at all fearful of supernatural forces, they were also thorough; by the time archaeologists arrived, every cave but one had been scraped clean of every human artifact. In that sole untouched cave, however, they found the earliest known traces of Kiev's first Neolithic inhabitants. These were remarkable discoveries—a flint blade, pottery shards, and a burned-out granite hearth so brittle from repeated firings that a trespasser could pulverize the stone to powder just by gripping a piece of it with his fingers. Further excavation of the area unearthed some two thousand human skeletons. The Berner Estate had been a burial ground.

By that spring day in 1911, the archaeologists were long gone, and the area had become a no-man's-land, a local newspaper branding it "a place for the Lukianovka children's games, where local hooligans and derelicts have convenient refuge." But the lore persisted of lost Cossack treasure, hidden by a leader or "hetman," or by the rebellious eighteenth-century plunderers known as the Haidamaks. In the imaginations of the two young boys that March afternoon, somewhere within this broad, bleak slope, only a thousand feet from their neighborhood's crooked streets, vast riches lay hidden. Standing at the crest of the slope, which was rather steep, the boys could see the brownish ribbon of the Dnieper River, which marked Kiev's upper boundary. To the right, about halfway down, they could see the awnings and chimneys of the brick factory owned by the Jew Zaitsev. The neighborhood children liked to sneak onto the factory grounds and play there until the watchman chased them off.

The boy in charge of the expedition, Peter Elansky, led his friend Boris Beloshchitsky downhill to a cave dug into the side of a small mound. At either end of the mound were two trees, standing like sentries, their roots intertwined above its black mouth. On the ground near the cave lay something that caught Peter's eye—a torn-up school composition book. He read the name inscribed on the cover, but it meant nothing to him.

Boris was afraid of entering the cave. Treasure, everyone knew, could be guarded by the Haidamaks' angry ghosts. But Peter did not hesitate. This cave was a perfect place for a Cossack to have stashed his gains, with an entrance about three and a half feet high and two and a half feet wide—small enough to discourage adults, but big enough for a boy to scuttle through in a crouch.

The entrance to the cave was partially blocked with melting snow. With the temperature now barely above freezing, Kiev was three days into the spring thaw that each year turned the city's dirt streets into muddy rivers and aroused fears that the great Dnieper would brim over in another disastrous flood. A small stream of water trickled into the cave, but inside it was dry. After creeping six feet in, Peter could see that the cave forked at right angles into two niches. He could stand up easily now—inside, in places, the cave was more than five feet high. He looked first into the left-hand niche. He saw a figure, slumped against the wall. At first he thought it was a doll. Then he thought it was a woman. He had surely seen innumerable drunks passed out on the streets of Lukianovka, which had drinking establishments on nearly every corner. But this was motionlessness of a more peculiar and scary sort.

Peter ducked out of the cave and ran to get his stepfather, Leonty Sinitsky, who happened to be a police department paramedic. He was skeptical—surely, he thought, the boy was imagining things. But at about two p.m., he went with his stepson to the cave to check. He wriggled halfway in. There was not much light, but he could see there was a human figure, which looked to him like a man with a beard. He was seized by a fear that someone might be waiting within the cave to stab him. He squirmed out and ran with Peter to a nearby church, where he knew a policeman ought to be on duty.

A few moments later a policeman's whistle rang out, rousing a beat cop who, informed of the situation, went

with Sinitsky and his stepson to the cave. The officer squeezed in and lit a match. The body belonged to a boy, he said, not a man or a woman, and he was dead. Clad only in a shirt and knee-length underwear and a single threadbare sock, it was lying in a semi-upright position, its hands tied behind with twine. Directly above the body, five school composition books were wedged into a crevice in the cave wall. A belt lay on top of the half-bare legs, which were bent and crossed. When the belt was turned over, it revealed an inscription: Andrei Yushchinsky Kiev-St. Sophia Religious School.

Sinitsky and the police officer stood over the body, its image flashing out of the gloom with each new match the officer struck. The policeman wanted to take the belt out of the cave, but Sinitsky stopped him—he knew that nothing should be removed from the scene until investigators arrived. Sinitsky, present by happenstance, would turn out to be the only person who tried to prevent the disastrous mishandling of the crime scene. When reinforcements arrived, a certain Officer Rapota, a stout fellow, found he could not squeeze himself into the cave. A shovel appeared. The snow was cleared away, and with it any clues it might have contained.

Just three hundred yards away from the cave, a Jewish clerk, Mendel Beilis, was sitting at his desk in his office on the edge of the Zaitsev brick factory, where he had been working since before dawn. “As I looked through the window,” he later recalled, “I saw people hurrying somewhere, all in one direction. It was a usual thing to see individual workers coming to the factory, or passers-by. But now there were people in large groups, walking rapidly from various streets.” When he stepped outside to find out what was going on, he was told that the body of a boy had been found nearby. He considered this disturbing news for a moment, and then went back to filling out receipts for the endless convoy of horse-drawn carts leaving the factory laden with bricks.

Soon it seemed all of Lukianovka was streaming into the Berner Estate, with a local newspaper reporting that “crowds of the curious surrounded the cave in a thick circle.” Many of the onlookers wanted to get into the cave; reinforcements arrived but the officers had a hard time holding back the crowd. Everything should have been left undisturbed until the arrival of the lead detective; instead, the belt, the five notebooks (on which were also inscribed the same name, Andrei Yushchinsky), and some pieces of newspaper smeared with blood were sent back to the precinct house. The boy’s jacket and cap, found lying in the right-hand niche, were placed outside the cave, free for people in the gathering crowd to pick up and examine.

Among the first onlookers that the police invited into the cave to try to identify the body was Vera Cheberyak, the mother of Andrei Yushchinsky’s best friend, Zhenya. Cheberyak was a notorious figure in Lukianovka. Some years earlier she had blinded her lover, a French accordion player, with sulfuric acid, yet somehow escaped punishment. She was also reputed to be the keeper of a den of thieves, a fence for stolen goods, and a sometime procuress. For years, somewhat incongruously, she had been married to a respectable civil servant, with whom she had three children. When she saw the body, Vera Cheberyak told the police that the child did resemble a friend of her son’s but the name on the belt was not familiar to her. She knew the boy only by a nickname, “Domovoi” or “Goblin.” Later that day, she returned to the cave with Zhenya, who had told her his friend’s real name was Yushchinsky. Mother and son were led through the cave’s well-cleared entrance and into the left-hand niche. When the boy saw the body, he said, “Yes mama, that’s definitely him. It’s Goblin.”

#

Nearly everyone in Andrei Yushchinsky’s world seemed to have a nickname. “Honeybunch,” “Frog,” “Wolfie,” “Snub-Nose,” “Crooked Arm,” “Crosseyed,” “Sailor.” The provenance could be obvious or obscure. But once a Russian child was given a nickname, there was no outgrowing it. It followed you to the brink of the grave, where it was finally left behind, and a proper Christian name and surname etched on the nameplate affixed to the simple cross. Andrei, though, would be denied even that small dignity. His grave

marker would always tell a half-truth. Andrei was legally barred from bearing the name of the father who had sired him and then abandoned him and his mother, when he was less than two years old, to serve in the tsar's army, it was said, somewhere in the Far East.

Friends noticed Andrei avoided saying his last name, Yushchinsky, his mother's maiden name, which was a mark of his illegitimate birth. (Some only learned of it for the first time after his death.) But he certainly liked to talk about his father. He mentioned him often, insisting to his friends that he would eventually be reunited with this mythical man, Feodosy Chirkov, who could not even give him his name. He would declare dreamily to his friends that his father would soon reappear and summon his son to go live with him, and how he would take only his grandmother along with him, not his mother or even his beloved aunt Natalia, because if he took them with him, people would think his father wanted only to beget another child with one woman or another, and he was not going to let people think that. At other times, he envisioned the reunion as happening in the more distant future. As soon as he came of age, he told his friends, he would track his father down in the Far East, where he was surely still alive and waiting for him.

As for his Christian name, all his life the family called Andrei by the usual Russian diminutive, "Andrusha." But he was known to nearly everyone else in Lukianovka by his nickname, "Domovoi." The word is usually translated as "goblin," but "house spirit" gives a more accurate idea of its meaning. A *domovoi* is a kind of dwarfish, impish poltergeist. In Slavic folklore, the *domovoi* (from the root *dom*, meaning "home") is the true master and protector of your household. If you are a good tenant of your residence, he will treat you well, tend the hearth and livestock, and safeguard your domicile. If you anger him, he will play tricks on you, make terrifying noises, throw crockery around in the dead of night.

Vera Cheberyak claimed it was her own Zhenya who had bestowed the nickname on the boy when Andrei was little because he wore a red hat, just as *domovoi*s were said to, but she made the claim only after both boys were dead. Perhaps the moniker's origin had something to do with Andrei's stature; as he entered adolescence, he seemed to grow hardly at all. But a neighbor who had known Andrei from his earliest years believed the nickname came about because of the boy's restlessness after dark. Andrei would roam the streets at night alone. "I would ask him: 'Why are you walking around so late? Aren't you afraid?'" the neighbor recounted. "And he would say: 'Why should I be afraid of anything?'"

On the morning of Saturday, March 12, 1911, Andrei awoke around six a.m. He got up carefully enough not to rouse his two brothers who slept in the same room. His mother and stepfather were both at work, so he didn't have to worry about anyone asking him any questions. He could focus on his plans for this special day without having to waste his boyish ingenuity on lies. Andrei had a secret on this day. Maybe he thought of it as a reward for all the dogged schoolwork he had done. He was going to play hooky—the only time he was known to have done so—and visit his old neighborhood of Lukianovka.

In the kitchen he washed his hands with cold water—there was no soap and no mirror to help him groom his blond hair. He was lucky that morning there was some leftover borscht to eat for breakfast; more often than not there was nothing at all, and he would go hungry until the afternoon or later. The deprivation had likely stunted his growth. At thirteen, Andrei was barely four feet four inches tall. (The autopsy report would find his body to be "of weak build and not well nourished.")

The borscht itself evinced the family's desperation. The day before, Andrei's mother, Alexandra, had gone to her own mother, complaining that she didn't have a single kopek. Alexandra's tiny income from taking in laundry and selling vegetables door-to-door, and her husband Luka's wages as a bookbinder, were barely enough to fend off starvation. Alexandra's mother had given her sixteen kopeks, enough to make the pot of soup with potatoes, beets, cabbage, and sunflower-seed oil.

Alexandra's sister, Andrei's aunt Natalia, had come by that night and taken the potato peels for her cow (outside its urban center, much of Kiev in those days was more village than city, and many people kept livestock). She tried the borscht and found it sour. But for Andrei the next morning a little of the borscht with a crust of bread made for a good start to his day.

The house had no clock. But Andrei somehow always woke up on time. His teachers said his attendance record was good and he always arrived punctually at eight thirty a.m. As Andrei left the house that Saturday morning, he appeared to be on his way to the Kiev-St. Sophia Religious School (a six-day school week was the norm in Russia) where he was studying with the eventual goal of becoming a Russian Orthodox priest. Prodded by his aunt Natalia, he had worked with a tutor (who had found him to be "very receptive," though "a little moody") for nine months to prepare for the school entrance exam. He had attended school regularly since the fall of the previous year and had received average grades, no mean accomplishment considering his circumstances.

He wore a blouse, embroidered by his mother, dark trousers, a cap with the school badge, a uniform jacket, and a padded felt coat. He bound his schoolbooks with the two leather straps his aunt Natalia, who paid for his schooling, had given him for Christmas. His schoolwork required only three books or so each day, but he always carried all seven or eight, plus a half-dozen notebooks with him because he was afraid one of his younger half brothers would tear them up if he left them at home.

Andrei went down a few steps to the street—the building stood on pillars, insurance against a modest flood. A boy who lived next door, Pavel Pushka, saw Andrei leave the house, slinging over his shoulder the heavy load of books, which were mere props that day. Pavel walked along with him a bit, but Andrei didn't say a word.

The previous fall, Andrei's family had moved from Lukianovka to Nikolskaya Slobodka, just outside the city on the Dnieper's left bank. Andrei still did not feel at home there. He would play in the street with the shopkeepers' sons, and some of the Jewish children (his new neighborhood was an area where Jews could live freely), but he had no real friends. He must have missed Lukianovka, where he ran with his best friends Zhenya, Ivan the cabdriver's son, and Andrei Mais-trenko, whose mother was a state liquor store cashier. But they rarely all played together; when Andrei was with Zhenya they liked it to just be the two of them.

As Andrei walked westward past the mostly commercial storefronts of Slobodka's dreary streets, he may have looked forward to strolling across the magnificent entrance to the city of Kiev, the famous Nikolaevsky Chain Bridge over the Dnieper. Half a mile long, with four stone towers, each one hundred feet tall, it was the longest suspension bridge in the world when it was completed in 1856.

Little more is known about what Andrei did after he crossed that bridge. He was spotted at a market that morning about a half hour from home; he may have been looking to buy gunpowder for his homemade gun, which was his passion. He had fashioned it out of a piece of pipe he'd bought for thirty kopeks. (A handy boy—later, at the trial, his grandmother Olympiada said, "Whatever he saw, he made.") Maybe he was planning all the while to obtain the gunpowder from Zhenya, who made his own. Whatever the exact nature of his plans, walking at a good pace, it took him over an hour to get to the Cheberyak house in Lukianovka. He knocked on the door and Zhenya came out to play.

#

A little before seven a.m. on that Saturday, a lamplighter named Kazimir Shakhovsky was walking home, ladder on his shoulder, having filled the streetlamps on his route with kerosene. He lived on Polovet-skaya

Street, about fifty steps away from Zhenya Cheberyak's home on Upper Yurkovskaya Street. He remembered the day well because he was on his way back from his boss's house, where he had just got a ruble advance on his salary and a fresh batch of kerosene. At home, his wife, Ulyana, took the ruble and headed to the grocery store. On the way, she saw Andrei and his friend Zhenya standing on the corner of Polovetskaya and Upper Yurkovskaya talking and eating candy. She noticed Andrei was not wearing a coat and was carrying his belt of books. She spent ten kopeks on some bread and sausage that her husband ate for breakfast.

Kazimir left the house, passing the state liquor store on the ground floor of the Cheberyaks' building, which was already open, meaning it was a little past eight a.m. (the Russian Empire, brutal in so many ways, indulged its drinkers), and came upon Andrei and Zhenya, who were still standing on the sidewalk and talking, a little farther down the street from where Ulyana saw them. Kazimir noticed that Andrei had a jar about two inches tall with something black inside that he was sure was gunpowder. The boy was excited to see "Lamplighter," according to Kazimir, though it is not clear why. "He ran up to me and hit me on my shoulder with his hand and asked me where I was going," the man recalled. "He hit me pretty hard—it hurt, so I got angry .??. I told him he had no business knowing where I was going." Turning around, he spat out, "Bastard!"

If Andrei was hurt by this word, which he must have heard many, many times in his brief life, he did not show it. "Gramps, where are you going? Take me with you," he pleaded. Kazimir was going out to catch goldfinches to sell live at the market; Andrei, who had a net and liked to catch birds, would have enjoyed that. But Lamplighter pushed ahead to his destination, leaving Andrei behind, the taunt of "bastard" ringing in his ears. He was the last person known to have seen Andrei alive.

Revue de presse
"Levin's subtle, multilevel book hits the mark everywhere the author aims. The huge surviving dossier allows him to craft a detailed true-crime story . . . [This is] a compelling recreation of an extraordinary clash of medieval and modern."

—*Maclean's*

"Every once in a while a writer encounters a story so compelling that even when rigorously researched and historically accurate, it can be shaped to captivate the reader. Levin has accomplished this with *A Child of Christian Blood* . . . a must-read, particularly for anyone with an interest in criminal law, legal history, and infamous criminal trials."

—*Virginia Law Weekly*

"Deeply researched and carefully argued, [this] is the most thorough, reliable, and readable book on the subject to date." —*The Wall Street Journal*

"Thorough, lucid, and on all counts admirable . . . *A Child of Christian Blood* was researched almost entirely from primary sources by Levin, [and] he has done a superb job . . . This may well be the definitive book on its subject, and it is to be hoped that it finds a wide readership." —Jonathan Yardley, *The Washington Post*

"Levin's main task is to keep up with the intrigue and present it in such a way that the reader never loses sight of the overall impact. He does so splendidly. . . . *A Child of Christian Blood* is a thorough and necessary account of the Andrei Yushchinsky murder." —*Forward*

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"History buffs and scholars alike will find this detailed examination of the case worth reading." —*Library*

Journal

“*A Child of Christian Blood* is at once a shocking murder mystery and a fine work of social history. It is a strange and dark tale, and Levin brings it vividly to life.” —Steve Oney, author of *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank*

“Levin’s detailed description of the trial and the events leading up to it will likely leave contemporary readers as stunned and horrified as many observers were at the time. This is a fascinating and disturbing depiction of the blood libel and ‘a cautionary reminder of the power and persistence of a murderous lie,’ one that, Levin notes, persists even to the twenty-first century.” —*Booklist*

“*Good Morning America* writer/producer Levin makes a century-old murder case come to life in a suspenseful true-crime thriller that had broad implications at the time. . . . [His] stellar re-creation of the personalities and events places them into the context of Russia during the last years of the tsar, and makes good use of records unavailable before the fall of the Soviet Union.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“This page-turning history/true-crime story surrounding the myth of blood libel . . . is a perfect fit for the talents of Emmy Award–winning *Good Morning America* writer and producer Levin. His easy narrative style makes the book read like a novel [and he] tells the story clearly, without provocative bias, while pointing out how the entire world demonstrated their incredulity at the absurdity of the entire episode.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“A simply outstanding, totally gripping book, elegantly narrated, deeply researched, and impossible to put down. It is a rare delight both as a brilliant history and a suspenseful whodunit that also refreshes a neglected though infamous story of terrible injustice that we should all know about: the Beilis blood libel—the Tsarist Russian version of the Dreyfus case.” —Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of *Young Stalin* and *Jerusalem: The Biography*

“Long before O. J. Simpson and Amanda Knox, Mendel Beilis was the most famous defendant of his time—the last Jew ever to be tried for blood libel. Edmund Levin’s *A Child of Christian Blood* brings the bizarre episode to life with passion and precision. It’s a fascinating and cautionary tale, beautifully told.” —George Stephanopoulos

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