I DIDN'T KNOW much about her when, in my early twenties, I stole her photograph from my grandmother's drawer. But I sensed she was important to me somehow. I carefully slid the picture into the tiny Chinese leather album with cut-out frames I had found among my family's treasures from Harbin.

Manya was my grandmother Gita's younger sister. Her photograph was a perfect fit for the small rectangular space next to the picture Gita had inscribed to my grandfather four months before their marriage in 1927.

At seventeen, Gita was a classic beauty. Her dark, knowing eyes stared directly out of the photo with a quiet certainty. But her simple, sombre dress with white lace collar—perhaps her school uniform—gave away her wholesome innocence. I adored my grandmother, but could never imagine living her life, defined as it was by marriage and family.

Manya was quite different. Photographed in her early twenties, she looked more worldly-wise and modern. Dressed in an open-necked trench coat, with dark shoulder-length hair, Manya had a certain 1930s glamour. Gazing mysteriously into the distance, she looked like she was going places. Though I had never known her, Manya struck me as someone I could relate to.

Why didn't I ask my grandmother for the photo? I knew there was nothing she would ever deny me. But instinct told me there would be less pain caused this way. Besides, I did not know how to explain why I was filling the little album with photographs of myself and my family. Some had been taken in Sydney, but most were from Harbin, the city in north China where several generations of my family had lived and where I was born. At that stage, my fascination with the lost world of Russian Harbin was still ill-defined. And my vague yearning to connect to family across continents and generations was something I had not articulated, even to myself.

Russian Jews have a tradition of naming a child after a dead relative. I am named after Manya, whose full name in Russian was Maria. They called me Marianna as this name derives from the same Hebrew root as Maria—shortened in my case to the Russian 'Mara'. Why not 'Manya'? In 1950s Harbin, my family thought it too reminiscent of the *shtetls* (Jewish villages) of Byelorussia, which my great-grandparents had left behind—together with poverty and pogroms—at the turn of the twentieth century.

All I knew about Manya when I was growing up was that she had been a dentist and had died in Stalin's purges along with her father, Girsh, and brother, Abram. She was twenty-six years old. 'What was she like? Why did they kill her?' I remember asking. The most I ever got in reply was, 'She wasn't as beautiful as your grandmother, but she was very clever. As for her death—you know she died in the purges. Stalin didn't need a reason.'

From my grandmother's stories, I knew that in the mid-1930s, Manya, her parents Girsh and Chesna Onikul, and two brothers Abram and Yasha, left Hailar, a small town in the Manchurian steppes north-west of Harbin, to escape the Japanese occupation and build a new life in the Soviet Union. Gita, who was already married, stayed in Harbin with my grandfather, Motya Zaretsky, and my mother, Inna.

The Onikuls went to Gorky, the city I knew as the place of exile in the 1980s of the Nobel Prize-winning human rights activist Andrei Sakharov. Formerly Nizhny Novgorod, the city was renamed in Soviet times after the proletarian writer Maxim Gorky, who was born there. How appropriate that in Russian *gorky* means 'bitter'. In hindsight, it seems bizarre that, after twenty-five years in Manchuria, the Onikuls chose to go there on the eve of the Great Terror. But life in Manchuria under Japanese occupation in the 1930s was full of menace for many Russians, particularly those who, like the Onikuls, had Soviet identity papers.

In the late 1930s, a wall of silence descended between the Onikuls, caught in the Stalinist terror followed by the war, and my grandparents, the Zaretskys, living under the Japanese puppet regime in 'Manchukuo'. Only in the mid-1950s, after the death of Stalin, did news reach Harbin that two of the Onikuls—Gita's mother, Chesna, and her younger brother, Yasha—had survived the purges. By some miracle, in the late 1950s, each separately visited Harbin from Riga, the capital of Latvia where they were then living. Chesna brought the news that her husband, Girsh, and two other children, Manya and Abram, had perished. I was too young then to understand what was going on.

In 1959, a couple of years after these visits, my family left Harbin for Australia. By that time, the once thriving Russian community had become an anachronistic enclave of some one thousand people. The Chinese Revolution was in full swing and we were not wanted.

==============

Growing up Russian in Sydney in the 1960s, one couldn't escape reminders of the Cold War world. The spy drama that gripped Australia after the defection of two Soviet agents, the Petrovs, in 1954 was still fresh in people's minds. I would often be put on the spot when asked where I came from.

'China,' I would answer.

'That's funny, you don't look Chinese.'

'No, I'm Russian.'

'Are you a Communist?', the next question might be, or 'Are you White Russian or Red Russian?' These were not the sort of questions most Australian children my age had to field.

'No, I'm Russian from China. I've never even been over there.'

'Yes, but what about your parents?'

'They haven't either.'

The ideological divide between Soviet and émigré Russians was accentuated at Russian school, which I attended on Saturdays for ten years. Organised by Russian *Harbintsy* (people of Harbin) to ensure their children preserved their heritage, we were taught language, literature and history, as well as singing and ballet. The standard of teaching was generally very high and enabled most of us to take Russian as an extra subject for matriculation. But it had its idiosyncrasies.

Although the text books we used were printed in the Soviet Union, they were censored before they were handed out to us. This meant that all references to the Soviet Union, Communist Party, the Pioneers (a youth group most Soviet children attended), the *kolkhoz* (collective farm) and other Soviet concepts were glued over with paper. So were Soviet symbols in illustrations, such as the Soviet crest with hammer and sickle and even the red stars on top of the Kremlin towers.

Predictably, our study of Russian history, taught by a woman whom we nicknamed 'Catherine the Great' because of her pompadour hairstyle and elaborate dresses, ended with the fall of the House of Romanov in 1917. 'What happened after that?' I remember asking, mischievously. In fact, I knew full-well having already studied the Bolshevik Revolution at high school. The teacher looked disapproving, as if I had asked her where babies came from, and suggested that I go home and ask my mother.

Still, I knew that 'over there', behind the infamous 'iron curtain', I had relatives whom I would probably never see again.

=======

By the early 1990s, everything had been turned on its head. Though he survived a coup by Communist Party hardliners, Gorbachev was no longer leader. Boris Yeltsin, Gorbachev's radical reform rival who had rallied opposition against the coup was now the first elected President of the Russian Federation. The red Communist flag with hammer and sickle had been replaced by the old Russian white, blue and red minus the Tsarist double-headed eagle. The final curtain had descended on the Soviet Union.

In the summer of 1992, I spent a month's holiday in Russia with Australian friends, Olga and Bradley Wynne, who were living in Moscow, where Olga was on posting with the Australian Embassy. I also met a few remaining relatives, including my great-uncle Yasha's wife Galya in Riga. She gave me some old family photographs and papers, among them five small official certificates, each headed *Spravka.* Dating from 1956, several years after Stalin died, these were the certificates of 'rehabilitation'. Cryptically, they noted that the charges against each of the Onikul family members had been dropped and their sentences revoked in the absence of criminal evidence.

Charges? What charges? I wondered.

When I showed my friends the treasures I brought back from Riga, Olga—like me—was captivated by the old photographs. Bradley immediately zeroed in on the *spravkas.* He told me the 'new KGB' was opening up its archives and starting to release information about Stalin's purges.

'You could approach them and see what information they will give you about what happened to your family,' he suggested.

'What? Go to the Lubyanka?' I shuddered. The building complex in the centre of Moscow has housed Soviet state security in all its incarnations since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, as well as its infamous central prison. First it was the Cheka, then the GPU, OGPU, NKVD, MVD and finally the KGB. Now, since the collapse of communism in 1991, it is called the FSB (Federal Security Service). Has anything else changed, I wondered? There was one sure way to find out.

———

Bradley joins me on my Lubyanka mission, as much to satisfy his own curiosity as to make sure I stay out of trouble. We have tried to call the FSB to find out where we should go but the lines are permanently busy. I am beginning to learn that this is typical of Moscow's clogged public phone system. 'Let's just go to the Lubyanka and knock on the door,' I say with false bravado.

Armed with the Onikul *spravkas*, we catch the metro to Lubyanka Square. Neither of us really believes there will be any concrete outcome. We are prepared for the usual bureaucratic run-around—filling in forms, getting proof of identity, being told 'no, no, no'. But what the hell!

After a brief discussion at the FSB reception counter, we are directed first to one building around the corner, then to another down the road in Kuznetsky Most. The receptionist telephones ahead to say we are coming.

Number 22 is a graceful old mansion, apparently the home of a merchant in Tsarist times. A guard points the way to the reception room. Inside, a metal bust of Feliks Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret service, still oversees proceedings. I desperately want to photograph him, but Bradley reads my mind. 'Don't even think about it,' he warns. 'Just get what you came for.' His eyes flick knowingly to the two-way mirror on the side wall.

A young man appears from behind the screen. Dressed in blue jeans and a pale blue open-necked polo shirt, he is in his thirties. I guess that his closely cropped blond hair is a hangover from military service.

‘Good afternoon. I am Vladimir Nikolayevich...’ He speaks English with a Russian–American accent. I am so taken aback by his informal appearance that I miss his surname. I introduce myself in Russian, as does Bradley, and I start to explain what I am after.

‘Reception told me you were Australian...’ he interjects in English. I wonder whether this is for Bradley’s benefit or if he is just showing off. ‘But you speak Russian too well for it to be a second language. Yet clearly you are not, “one of us”, as they say,’ he remarks, raising one eyebrow in a question mark.

In Russian, I tell him that I am indeed Australian, but born in China of Russian parents. I start to explain that I am visiting my friend Bradley and his wife who is on posting with the Australian embassy.

‘From Harbin?’ Vladimir interjects again, this time in Russian.

I nod.

‘Interesting,’ he says knowingly and waves us into his office. Vladimir is the face of the new KGB.

I explain to Vladimir the story of my grandmother’s family who returned to the Soviet Union in the 1930s and got caught in Stalin’s purges. I pass him the rehabilitation *spravkas* and ask him what I need to do to investigate their fate. Predictably, he tells me I must put my request in writing. Bradley and I exchange glances. Just then the phone rings and Vladimir answers it.

‘Here comes the bureaucratic run-around...’ Bradley whispers to me in English.

‘Well, we’ve got this far, may as well keep going,’ I whisper back and smile at Vladimir.

‘Nobody is engaged in repression now, madam,’ Vladimir tells the caller, ‘we are only involved in rehabilitation.’ Vladimir winks at me irreverently. He has engaging blue eyes. ‘Please send your request to the address I just gave you and it will be dealt with.’ He puts down the phone and turns back to us.

‘Please excuse me for this interruption, but we are economising on telephonists. Now, as I was saying, you will need to draft a letter formally requesting the information about your relatives. Then, we will try to locate any files that may still be in the archives and get them for you. Let’s do the letter right now. I take it you write Russian, as well as speak it?’

I nod.

‘Of course. Good. Then I will dictate and you will write. It will be quicker that way.’ He hands me some blank paper.

‘First write the address—*Rehabilitation Group, Directorate for Moscow and the Moscow Region, Ministry of Security of the Russian Federation.* From—your name. Then keep it simple—*Please advise on the fate of my relatives, the Onikul family, victims of the purges, whose names are listed below*. Leave the rest of the page blank and I will fill in their names from the *spravkas* and the details of your request. I’ll ask for all the standard information: when and why they were arrested, what they were charged with, any other information or remaining personal photographs, letters etc. Let me just photocopy the *spravkas* to attach to your request,’ he says turning on a small Xerox machine behind him. I have the sense that Vladimir has been through this routine before.

‘It may take some time to track down your family’s files. They are certainly not held here in Moscow.’

‘But I’ll only be in Russia for a couple more weeks. I’m just visiting my friends who are with the Australian embassy here,’ I say pointing to Bradley. Perhaps mention of my ‘connections’ will help speed things up?

‘Then you’d better authorise your friends to receive the information on your behalf,’ says Vladimir. ‘So, please write: *As I will be leaving Moscow soon, I entrust*—put your friend’s name—*of the*

Australian embassy in Moscow to receive any spravkas and materials. And put the phone numbers. Then *I also authorise him to familiarise himself with the criminal cases*.

I flinch at the matter-of-fact way the word 'criminal' rolls off his tongue.

'Sign and date. That's all. As soon as we get something, we'll be in touch.'

Bradley and I walk out into the late Moscow afternoon, shell-shocked. Lubyanka Square is almost deserted. Hungry and in need of a sanity check, we walk past the ugly grey monoliths of Stalinist realism along Tverskaya, the main street of central Moscow, straight to McDonald's on Pushkin Square. It is four o'clock and the rush hour has not yet started. But soon the queue will stretch around the corner, thanks to the artificially low rouble prices. The popularity of this icon of American cultural imperialism which opened a year and a half ago infuriates communist and Russian ideologues alike, Bradley tells me. But in the absence of Russian fast food of any quality, even to an Australian yuppie sworn off the brand, a 'Big Mak' tastes good.

'Well that's certainly not your old KGB', I remark, recalling the treatment I received in the Soviet Union as a visiting journalist in 1987. Bradley is more sober in his appraisal: 'The new look is good, but let's see what they actually deliver.'

============

The FSB deliver much more than I bargained for. After several months, I receive a summary on the fate of the Onikuls from the Ministry of Security of Nizhny Novgorod, the city known as Gorky in Soviet times, where the family lived in the 1930s. My discoveries are chilling. At the height of Stalin's purges in 1937, the entire family was arrested as Japanese spies. I find it all totally inconceivable; after all, the Onikuls had left Manchuria in order to escape the Japanese! What could they possibly have done to have been suspected of such a crime? Can I ever find out? I am tantalised by the thought of unresolved family secrets lying buried in the depth of a Russian archive.

Four years later in 1996, I visit the state archive in Nizhny Novgorod to find out.

I am led to the reading room with desks set up in rows, as in a school room. A couple of people sit studying files. Apart from the hollow rustle of old paper and the odd whisper, there is silence. I sit down at a desk and wait for what feels like hours. In fact, the archivist returns in a few minutes.

Five faded, reddish brown files lie before me, each tied tightly with discoloured cotton tape. I stare at them. Now what? I never quite believed this moment would arrive.

Opening the first file—Manya's—a chill runs down my spine. The first page is a note, neatly handwritten by the Head of the Department of State Security of the Gorky regional NKVD. Dated 7 October 1937, it says Manya is charged under Article 58.6 with 'espionage activities in the interests of one of the foreign intelligence agencies'. She is being held in custody in Gorky Prison. Next comes an order for her search and arrest, dated 2 October, and a form giving personal particulars. Then pages and pages of handwritten interrogation records—question/answer, question/answer. Names I have never heard of jump out at me, as well as names I recognise.

I feel sick. Apart from the people who cleared these files for release, no-one has looked at them for forty years. Laid out here are people's lives—their secrets. I feel like a voyeur. How different is this

from reading other people's mail? I am intruding on the lives of people I have never met. What right do I have to do this?

But the injustice of what I am uncovering is so enormous. Do I have the right to stop? I look through Manya's file to get a sense of what is there.

The first record of interrogation starts with a *pro forma* biographical questionnaire. On the second page, Manya answers *nyet* ('no') seven times. Most of the questions relate to activities during the Russian Revolution and the Civil War. Born in 1911, she was too young for that. The next page gets straight to the point:

Question: *When were you recruited as an agent of the Japanese secret service?*
Answer: *I was never recruited into the Japanese secret service.*
Question: *You are lying. Our investigations have clearly established that, while living in Hailar, you were recruited into the Japanese secret service and were transferred into the territory of the USSR with the objective of espionage. Do you acknowledge that?*
Answer: *No, I do not.*
Question: *Your denial is useless. I insist categorically that you give honest evidence on this question.*
Answer: *I repeat. I have never been an agent of the Japanese secret service.*
The evidence was recorded accurately from my words and read by me.

Below is Manya's signature and the signature of her interrogator. I am stunned. Not just by the significance of what I am reading, but by the detail in which it is recorded. From the correspondence I had received from the Ministry of Security, I already knew that Manya had been arrested as a Japanese spy. But here is the allegation in black and white.

Leafing further into Manya's file, the page falls open at a sparsely typed page headed 'Extract from Decree No. 273 of 7 January 1938'. This is her sentence:

HEARD:
Materials on the accused, presented by the NKVD of the Gorky region pursuant to NKVD order No 00593 of
20 September 1937,

DECREED:
ONIKUL, Maria Grigorievna TO BE SHOT
born 1911, Hailar, CER

signed:
People's Commissar for Internal Affairs USSR
Commissar General of Security — YEZHOV

Procurator USSR — VYSHINSKY

On the right-hand side is a handwritten note: *Shot 14.01.38*, *Gorky* and an illegible signature.

I freeze. The statement is so stark and impersonal. It took just three words and one week to end Manya's short life.

Yezhov and Vyshinsky are names I have only ever read in books. Yezhov's name in Russian is synonymous with the Great Terror. Vyshinsky was the sinister prosecutor at the 1930s Moscow show trials. What did these people have to do with our Manya, a twenty-six-year-old dentist from Hailar? Did they have any idea what they were signing?

Tears come to my eyes. I want to scream, to break the dreadful, echoing silence. But one look around the room brings me to my senses. People are sitting quietly, leafing through files, page by page, each undoubtedly wrapped in their own private tragedy. I have been oblivious to new readers entering the hall since I arrived. At the front of the room, the bespectacled duty archivist sits head down, doing her work—like a school mistress presiding over an exam. This is no place for drama. I bow my head and return to the files to take notes.