

# FRAGMENTS

Vol. IV

JANUARY - MARCH, 1966

No. 1

## Lilacs

By JACK SCHWARTZMAN

**WE** WERE fleeing the land of my birth, and my spirits sank low as I saw for the last time the old familiar sights. The stars were shining brightly that night; the fragrant aroma of Spring caused my youthful heart to beat fast; and I desperately longed to stay there forever.

Everywhere, the smell of lilacs was in the air. Everywhere, there were lilacs, lilacs, lilacs. It seemed as if the entire town was permeated with the scent of lilacs.

To this day, I cannot think of Russia without smelling lilacs; to this day, I cannot catch a whiff of lilacs without thinking of my native land.

My parents, my younger brother, and I were hurrying to the "contraband" carriage. We entered in silence, and huddled in the darkness. The driver whipped the air above the horses, and suddenly, we were off . . . off to a land uncertain . . . off to a destiny unknown. Our hearts were melancholy; our thoughts were bitter.

And everywhere, the smell of lilacs reached us, and the fragrance was intoxicating.

On flew the horses, on, on, onwards through the night. Backwards slid the houses, the trees, the river; backwards rushed the dreams, the memories, the hopes, the yearnings of youth. On sped the future; backwards fled the past.

How I longed to seize the escaping vistas; how I desired to hold on to the vanishing views of my childhood! The stars were resplendently bright and glimmering; the chirping noises of the night were symphonic and melodious. I have never before — nor ever since — felt such a deep "belonging," such a feeling of being part of God's universe; such a "responding to" the music of the night. As we drove on, I saw grandeur disappearing before my eyes. I felt sad-

ness rushing in to fill the vacuum of my heart.

And everywhere, the everlasting scent of lilacs greeted us, and the aroma was overwhelming.

And I thought to myself: How is it possible, in Russia, a land celebrated for its dreamers of liberty — Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy — that such a terrible enslavement should exist? How is it possible that in the birthplace of Moussorgsky and Tchaikovsky, where once strummed the plaintive balalaika, now whined unceasingly the shrill bullets; where once gaily tiptoed the lovely ballerina, now grimly trod the heavy boot of the Red conqueror?

And I thought to myself: Every nation on earth has produced its poets and dreamers and musicians; every nation on earth has spat forth its demagogues and debauchers and destroyers. On the same spot, the sun may shine brightly; on the same spot, the skies may pour forth a deluge of hail and devastation.

And I thought to myself: Whether under the tyranny of the Tsar or the dictatorship of the Commissar, the voice of liberty will, nevertheless, always be heard. In camps, in prisons, in hovels, in trenches, in palaces, in hospitals, in offices, in mansions, in fields, in towns, in "contraband" carriages, and in all the Siberias of the world — the song of freedom can never be silenced; the spark of hope can never be extinguished.

And I thought to myself: Men are men the world over, be they black or white or yellow or brown or red; be they Christians or Jews or Moslems or Hindus or Confucianists; be they royalists or anarchists or revolutionists or humanists or Communists; be they Frenchmen or Americans or Indians or Tartars or Russians; be they poets or soldiers or prisoners or musicians or politicians.

And I thought to myself: How wonderful it would be if the world of men were to accept diversity, and to welcome it! The earth is ablaze with the colors of flowers and fruits and foods and customs and languages and men. All things are different; therefore, all things are alike in their various magnificence.

And I thought to myself: The salvation of man lies in his ability to harness his dreams; in his capacity to capture the stars; in his endeavor to hear the eternal music of the spheres.

And I thought to myself: Someday, the land of Russia will be free: free, not because of the hocus-pocus of some political manifestation or some economic transmutation or some ritualistic-religious hodge-podge — but free because of the innermost ability of man to see the visage of God, and to understand the reason for man's own existence on earth. When the land of Russia — and the entire earth, for that matter — shall be genuinely free, it shall be free because man is able to understand that his destiny lies in himself.

And I leaned out of the carriage, and took a deep breath. The breeze that greeted me was full of the promise of Spring; the stars shone brightly — more brightly than I had ever seen them shine before; the sound of horses' hoofs was rhythmic and lulling; the night was cloaked with the sparkling splendor of God.

And as the horses, the carriage, and the people in it drove on to their destiny, I stole a glance at my mother. Sitting next to me, she too was staring into the night. Even in the darkness, I could see her face — and I saw that her eyes were bright with tears.

On flew the carriage, on, on, onwards through the night. The scent of lilacs was intoxicating.

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