

## A Talented Man

By Yossi Karp

A single charred digit, still gripping the steering wheel of his burned-out Cadillac proved sufficient for the DNA analysis to identify the dead man. It was odd that only a finger remained, but in the family's shock and grief, it didn't seem to matter. Stefan's career as a key player in the Vezirov *bratva*, the Vezirov crime family, had ended. But Stefan wasn't always a mafia hotshot. He started as imported muscle from the Soviet Union, sponsored by the US-Russia Cooperative. The privately funded not-for-profit organization's official charter was the promotion of trade between the two superpowers. The Cooperative's public statements were always thickly laced with phrases such as "trade agreements", "closer ties", and "exchange of knowledge and ideas". The marketing blurbs always ended with something like "for the advancement of both great countries". In fact, the US-Russia Cooperative was a front for the Vezirov *bratva* through which they imported some of their most valued merchandise - talent.

Stefan Zhukovsky lived in Volokolamsk. Volokolamsk, a town close to Moscow and near the Gorodenka River, is a tough place with a heritage to match. In 1941 a small number of Russian soldiers overpowered German tanks only a few kilometers from the town, repelling an attack on Moscow. From a young age, Stefan was indoctrinated with stories of the town's heroic and victorious history, of which he was exceedingly proud. He was brave but not foolish, clever but not cocky, and he never second-guessed himself. These traits served him well as a fix-it man for the Vezirov *bratva*'s Moscow operations. Tasked with rectifying the mistakes of his less competent colleagues, Stefan went about his work with the maturity of a veteran, despite his youth.

Such qualities were noticed and reported to Vezirov who decided to sponsor Stefan's immigration. Yuri, a representative of the US-Russia Cooperative, visited Stefan at his Volokolamsk apartment. Yuri was surprised at the young man's impressive height and thick build. Stefan held the door open. His shirtsleeves were rolled up to just below his elbows and Yuri couldn't help but notice Stefan's muscular forearms, which ended in a set of stubby, hairless fingers. Stefan scanned the forms that Yuri placed before him. He signed them with flawless penmanship, fully understanding what the papers meant and the commitments to which they bound him. A few months later, Stefan disembarked at O'Hare International Airport, sporting a new goatee and a tourist's English phrase book. As he emerged from customs, Stefan spotted the US-Russia

Cooperative representative waiting for him. Yuri waved enthusiastically. Stefan didn't smile.

Stefan never smiled. Not that he didn't have a sense of humor. Occasionally he would utter a clever witticism before executing a mark. He said that it made the victim more submissive. Secretly, though, he enjoyed prolonging the moment. But he never smiled.

Yuri directed Stefan towards a waiting 1967 black Cadillac Eldorado. Stefan stopped to admire the car. He had never seen such an elegant looking vehicle and he promised himself that one day he would own one just like it.

"What's my assignment?" Stefan asked bluntly in Russian. The airport slunk away behind them as they pulled out onto the highway.

"Why so quick with the assignments?" Yuri replied, a smirk creeping up the corner of his mouth. They all asked the same question. "Don't worry about that for now. First you learn English. Then you work."

Stefan didn't like Yuri's condescending tone of voice.

"Where are we going now?"

"To eat."

"Where?"

"A restaurant, it's called the Russian Lily. You'll love it. Good beef kotlety. Reminds me of home. Speaking of which, I'll take you to your apartment after we eat. I'm starved. I was waiting for you for ages. I hate waiting at airports. It makes me hungry."

"How far?"

"What's with all the questions?"

"How far?"

“About ten minutes.”

Slowly and deliberately, Stefan pulled a low caliber pistol out of his jacket and casually rested it on his lap.

“How did you get that? Where..? Didn’t security at the airport..?”

“I smuggled it in.”

“How?”

“Vezirov wants a talented man. Here I am. You just drive.”

Yuri stopped talking and stared ahead in stunned silence. Stefan deserved his reputation. He would go far, Yuri predicted to himself.

Stefan didn’t like Yuri. He talked too much, and his Russian accent was tainted with an irritating American twang. Stefan swore to maintain his Russian accent and Americanize his English. Over time, he proudly achieved both. Stefan never tired of the daily English lessons; he knew them to be important. Believing that communication is key, Vezirov insisted that all of his people learn the language.

Shortly after Stefan’s arrival in Chicago, Yuri took him to meet the boss. Vezirov was a short, plump, bearded, fidgeting man. He spoke rapidly and his sentences started on one topic and finished on another. Stefan concentrated hard to follow his boss’s train of thought. At one point, Stefan questioned Vezirov’s logic. The scorching look Vezirov flashed at Stefan did not intimidate him, it intrigued him. The intensity of the glare revealed flames of power and ruthlessness in Vezirov’s eyes. Stefan knew that this was a man he wanted to get to know.

Despite the minor disrespect, Vezirov liked Stefan. He was young, professional, and serious - perhaps a little too serious. And Stefan’s concentrated focus was impressive. Vezirov finally gave the order to find an opportunity to test the young Russian’s mettle.

That chance came along soon enough. The target was a professor of English literature at the University of Chicago. The professor had taken a fancy to the wrong student. The girl, Lera, was Vezirov's niece. Lera sobbed as she told her uncle that when she was in the professor's office discussing her latest paper, he suggested that he would guarantee a top grade if she performed certain favors for him. When she refused, the professor tried to force himself on her. Lera escaped the room physically unharmed but emotionally distraught. Hearing of the assault, Vezirov's face grew bright red as he hurled a vase against the wall and yelled, "I want him dead! Dead!"

The next afternoon, the professor was found in his office, hanging by one foot from the ceiling. His eyes were wide open, his mouth frozen in terrified agony. Blood pooled on the floor beneath his swinging body, its torso impaled by a Harrods umbrella. Sometimes these things required subtlety, other times not. Stefan knew what the boss wanted. Watching the video of the professor's death, Vezirov's anger was soothed.

What the video didn't show was the preamble to the killing.

After rendering the professor unconscious, Stefan suspended him by one leg, the rope attached to a ceiling fan. As he came-to, the professor slowly opened his eyes to see his attacker sitting opposite, quite relaxed.

"I hope you don't mind that I'm using your chair, Professor. It's much comfier than those visitor chairs," began Stefan. The professor, too terrified, didn't answer.

"I apologize for taking your time. I just need to ask you a few questions. That okay?" The professor, still unable to speak, moved his neck in a circular motion, attempting to nod. "I'll take that as a 'yes'. You see, I am learning English and have a whole bunch of questions. What an opportunity for you to help me out, no?"

His assailant was a madman, but the professor was only too keen to answer anything - say anything - if it would earn him his life.

"Firstly, there's some debate as to whether or not split infinitives are acceptable in modern English. What's your opinion?"

As best he could, the professor offered lengthy answers to all questions, trying to stall for time. He racked his brain for a way out, but hanging upside-down for so long was taking its toll. The pressure mounted in the professor's eye sockets and he felt himself blacking out. Stefan patted the professor on the face, reviving him somewhat.

"Professor, just one more question and then this interview will be over." Another circular head movement from the academic. Stefan activated a tripod-mounted video camera in the corner of the room. "Do you remember a student called Lera?"

The professor hesitated. He knew where this was leading and felt sickness surge in his throat.

"Yes." Almost a whisper.

"She told her uncle about what you did here in this office. The uncle is upset and has a message for you."

"I...apologize...I'm sorry...I just...I won't do it again..." the professor pleaded.

"No, you won't."

Stefan unhooked the metal-tipped Harrods umbrella from its place by the door and plunged it deep into the professor's belly.

Any assault on a family member was akin to an assault on Vezirov himself. That Stefan recorded the execution was, as Vezirov put it, sensitive to the boss's emotions. He liked Stefan's style and would make sure to keep his eye on the promising young Russian.

A month later, Vezirov issued an order for Stefan to attend an important meeting. The excuse was that he needed some muscle in the room, but in reality Stefan was to observe and learn.

Businessmen, lawyers and their assistants sat around a long oval conference table. Vezirov sat at its head making small talk with a man Stefan hadn't seen before.

“See that man talking with Vezirov?” whispered Yuri to Stefan.

“Yeah.”

“Watch him. He’s Russian by birth, but American in upbringing. Doesn’t speak a word of Russian, though. You think he made his fortune from his chain of fast food outlets? Don’t know about you, but I don’t see how selling burgers and fries can make you as rich as him. He’s into narcotics and counterfeiting, which is where his money comes from, I bet. Narcotics people are scum. When you walk in the sewers, it rubs off on you. The way he does business, he must swim in it. He’s here because he’s got a load of cash. Today Vezirov is going to really offer him an irresistible opportunity.”

Stefan ignored the split infinitive, “You haven’t told me his name.”

“Calls himself Alex Spicer. His real name is Alexi Spischev, but don’t let him hear you call him that.”

Vezirov wore a charming smile. He spoke clearly, diplomatically and with a remarkable degree of eloquence. Stefan raised an eyebrow and listened intently.

After a while it was clear that the negotiations were heading for an impasse. Vezirov banged his open hand down hard on the table and shot a glance towards Stefan.

“You, Zhukovsky, what would you say to an outrageous proposition like that?”

Alex Spicer sneered over his moustache at Stefan. Yuri inched away, hoping not to get caught in verbal crossfire.

“Gentlemen,” began Stefan in his still accented, but clear English, “Mathematics is a precise science. Two plus two must equal four. That is absolute. But negotiation is an art form. If I was to tell a painter that his style is wrong, he would reply that I have no taste.

“Although negotiation is an art, the numbers involved in the negotiations are science. So when I tell you, Mr. Spicer, that any grade-school mathematics student can see that

the offer you put on the table is insulting, I can forgive your disapproval of my style, but not your disagreement with the substance of the message.”

The room fell silent. “Well said,” acknowledged Spicer, intrigued by the young immigrant’s silver tongue. The deal, at more favorable terms, was signed. Stefan had every right to smile. He didn’t.

At that moment Vezirov knew that Stefan would not remain a hired gun for long. He brought the boy into the fold. So much, in fact, that he introduced the young Russian to his daughter, Marina.

From an early age Marina was aware of the generalities of her father’s business. She heard people talking in hallways, hushing their conversations as she walked past. Marina knew that her father was responsible for the deaths of those who crossed him. She was proud of him for it. Vezirov often repeated that a man must be principled. Principle, he taught, is not just a notion, but a belief. Once you compromise on that belief, you destroy who you are. Vezirov’s guiding principle was loyalty. Loyalty was praised. Loyalty was rewarded. The smallest breach of loyalty was unforgivable. So his order to eliminate those who betrayed him was the only logical course of action. Marina understood; she was also a believer.

When it came to his daughter, Vezirov knew what was best, and so he ordered her to go out with Stefan. Stefan, for the first time in memory, was nervous. In contrast to her father, Marina was tall and sophisticated. Her intelligence was intimidating and he couldn’t think of what to say to impress her. “I murdered a professor with a Harrods umbrella” probably wouldn’t get him very far. After a while, Stefan rationalized that because Vezirov was pushing the romance, he had no choice but to try and make it work. He began to open up. He developed a sensitive side. He bought her flowers and dug deep within himself to return her smiles.

Vezirov finally offered Stefan his daughter’s hand in marriage. Marina had no say in the matter. Stefan accepted. After all, refusing would be an affront that would not go unpunished.

Vezirov’s gift to the young couple was a house. A monstrosity. The Greco-Roman columns at the front were at odds with the oddly angled roof and the tall, narrow

windows. Despite its hideousness, Vezirov loved it and therefore so did Stefan and Marina. Vezirov's other gift was Stefan's promotion; he wouldn't have his son-in-law doing grunt-work. Stefan would be groomed for admittance into the Vezirov *bratva* inner-sanctum.

No longer involved in the dirty side of the organization, Stefan was quick to learn the business and ended up managing many of the Vezirov *bratva* operations, both legitimate and otherwise. Stefan gradually learned the organization's structure; who was important and who was expendable, when to show fury and when to show calm. Vezirov retained strict control, but Stefan earned his trust.

Frustrated with her fate, Marina threw herself into her studies. Soon after their wedding, Marina completed her degree in forensic accounting. In an unprecedented show of faith, her father made room for her at the US-Russian Cooperative, where she could be in the heart of the organization.

Marina channeled an immense amount of aggressive energy into her work. In a few years she was promoted to Chief Financial Officer of the US-Russia Cooperative from where she had a bird's-eye view of the entire organization. As a trained Forensic Accountant, not only did she know where to hide money, but she knew where others would look for it. Her father admired her financial genius, but Vezirov would never accept her as a top player in the *bratva*.

With many years of experience as the CFO, Marina was well acquainted with the stress of finalizing the year-end accounts. On the one hand, the organization had to maintain an honest façade. On the other hand, money trails needed to be swept over, covered and buried. It was a time of deep concentration and stress.

Uncharacteristically, Marina stayed late at the office; there was too much to do. Marina looked up from her computer screen just as the first workers began to arrive. She looked less like a corporate executive and more like a widow in mourning. In fact, she knew that's what she would soon be. After a night of crunching numbers, finding irregularities and smoothing out the books, Stefan was revealed as a traitor. A cleverly hidden money trail wound a circuitous route through the organization's various subsidiaries, finally ending in a private bank account. She would have to tell her father this morning. Vezirov would have no mercy.

The chauffeur pulled up at the front entrance to the Vezirov mansion. Marina stepped out of the car. She had changed clothes, reapplied her make-up and had her usual air of confidence about her. Inside, however, she was shaking. The butler showed her in. Her father was in the library, reading the morning paper. At first Vezirov didn't acknowledge her presence. After a moment he lifted his head out from behind the broadsheet and offered his daughter a generous smile.

"Marina. What a pleasant surprise. Will you be joining me for breakfast today?"

Marina shook her head, "No, Father. This is strictly a business call." She wanted to get it over and done with. "I have something to discuss with you, and it's urgent."

"Go on."

Marina closed the double-doors and sat down on the sofa. She opened her attaché case and removed a heavy file. During the next hour she detailed how money was stolen over an unknown period of time. Vezirov didn't interrupt.

"It's bad, Father. About \$635,000 was misappropriated this year, alone. I haven't chased the numbers from previous years. But, I did track the money back to the source. I know who did it." Her voice faltered at the words "did it". She coughed to cover her weakness. Marina could see the tension in her father's unwavering stare. "Stefan."

Vezirov closed his eyes. His daughter was very brave, and loyal. She was in no doubt of the consequences. Marina had principles. She made him proud. But the impact of her words struck his chest like a stake to the heart.

"Leave me, Marina." His voice was both soft and harsh. Stefan would have to die. The raw anger in the pit of his gut welled into a ball of rage that Vezirov struggled to control. He loosened his grip on the armrest, took one deep breath and asked his attendant to call Stefan in for a breakfast meeting. He would kill him personally, right here in this room, this morning.

When the attendant left the library, Stefan said, “She’s better at her job than I thought.” Vezirov’s muscles tightened and he turned his head to address the voice in the shadows behind him. A poke in the back of the neck from Stefan’s pistol told him to face forward.

“No, she’s not, Stefan,” Vezirov managed, “you are just not as good at covering your tracks as you thought you were. But she is loyal, Stefan. More than I can say for you. I brought you here, I raised you from nothing, I gave you power - I gave you my daughter! Now this?”

“Listen to me, I didn’t steal from you. You have to think about this - it doesn’t make sense. Marina set me up.”

“And I’m supposed to believe that?”

“You forced Marina to marry me. She hates me. She does anything to avoid being in the same room with me. She’s cold, heartless, bitter. She’ll never inherit your position, will she? Not while I’m around. I endeared myself to you too much. I was clearly next in line, right? I knew I couldn’t trust her. About three years ago I had one of the technicians monitor Marina’s computer. Late last night I received an automated alert that Marina’s account was registering a lot of unusual activity. She spent all night planting evidence. She sets me up and gets you to put out a hit on me. She proves her loyalty to you and then she’s guaranteed to inherit her father’s job, money and power.”

“It’s a good story, very creative. But you can’t prove it, Stefan. I’m not going to fall for it.” Vezirov’s voice was cool and steady.

“Why would I possibly steal such a small amount of money from you? What would I have to gain? You’d leave me everything in a few years, what could I possibly want with a few million when I could be twenty times richer by just hanging around? Look, as soon as I discovered what Marina was up to, I raced over here to sort this thing out, to make you see sense before it gets out of control. But you won’t listen, will you? You’d rather die an old, naïve man than live up to the truth. You’d rather me shoot you? Face the fact that Marina is manipulating you! She’s not the loyal daughter you think she is. She’s a liar and she’s playing you at your own game!”

“You know, killing me won’t get you far, Stefan. Not even you can get away with this. You cheated the Vezirov bratva. That means you stole from everyone in the family. There are plenty of family members out there who would gladly pull the trigger. You’re the dead man. You won’t last long out there. You’re not that good”

“Well, they said that Vezirov wants a talented man. Here I am.” Stefan quoted himself.

Vezirov’s last thoughts were confused as he tried to figure out what Stefan was referring to. The throw cushion Stefan held behind Vezirov to muffle the sound of the shots fell to the floor, stained crimson red.

Stefan moved quickly. He exited the house through a side door and left the mansion estate unnoticed. Stefan got into his restored black 1967 Cadillac Eldorado, which he bought from Yuri some years ago, and drove steadily for half an hour. He stopped at the top of a cliff overlooking Lake Michigan. Stefan picked this spot because it was the type of place Vezirov would have chosen - picturesque during the day, menacing at night-

An old tool shed leaned awkwardly against the wind. Inside, Stefan found the tools he needed, and the can of gasoline he put there earlier in case it came to this. Now that everything was in place, all he had to do was wait until nightfall.

The day passed slowly and Stefan thought of his wife, who he successfully used to climb higher in the organization. He didn’t love her. He never had. He thought of what would be happening in the Vezirov mansion: The discovering of the body, the frantic search of the premises, the women crying, the angry men swearing revenge. The last part is what he counted on.

As dusk closed in, Stefan took one last look at his car. He sloshed the gasoline liberally over its interior, especially over the driver’s seat. He then turned the empty gasoline canister on its side, wrapped a cloth tightly around his left hand and spread his fingers on the metal can. In one quick, decisive movement Stefan chopped off one of his own fingers with a small axe. The pain would have been excruciating had it not been for the anesthetic he administered to himself a few minutes prior. He tightened the cloth

to stem the bleeding. Stefan turned to an open tin of Fire-Block and calculated how long the fire-retardant liquid would take to give way before the flames start burning the finger. He applied just the right amount of liquid, hooked the severed finger onto the steering wheel and set the car alight.

The blaze could be seen for miles. It wouldn't be long until the police and the men of the *Vezirov bratva* arrive. Stefan removed a second set of keys from his pocket, tossed the axe, the Fire-Block and the gasoline canister into the trunk of an anonymous blue Chevrolet, and drove away.

Stefan, a talented man, was well and truly dead.