

REDEMPTION IN RED

Synopsis by

Steve Mihaylov
smihaylov@hotmail.com
(707) 664-0898

Mikhail Iliev
misho1938@yahoo.com
(646) 267-9426

WGAW Registration No: 2072030

U.S. Copyright Office Reg. No: PAu 4-055-862

The year 1985 draws to an end and the Cold War is as heated as ever. The Soviet Block has launched a concerted effort to outmaneuver the imperialistic West and win hearts and minds of neutral Lebanon. During a relative lull in the Lebanese Civil War, a Bulgarian Navy frigate docks at the port of Beirut, Lebanon, as part of the effort. Luben, a pedigreed counter-intelligence officer, possessed of that rare blend of talent and integrity, is undercover as political minder. Real mission: first, make sure everybody -- from the cook to the Captain -- follows Party directives to the T, and second, identify, prevent and, if need be, put an end to any defection attempts by personnel. Ironically, the ship's chief officer -- Captain Kris Krastev-- has picked this moment to do just that and right under Luben's nose. Captain Krastev's daring desertion is successful and becomes a coup for Western media and a huge embarrassment to the Soviet Block.

Luben's failure to prevent the defection fatally derails his otherwise brilliant career. He is swiftly brought before a military tribunal back in Bulgaria and sentenced to 20 years of hard labor at Bulgaria's infamous Belene Camp. It takes every last ounce of influence for his father, a legend in the intelligence community in his own right, to secure Luben one last, top-secret mission, and a chance for redemption. Luben is to assume a new identity and move to *Shuma*, Kris' hometown on the Bulgarian-Greek border. High-profile defections like Kris's, he is told, have a profoundly demoralizing effect on the fabric of Communist society, especially on the defector's friends and family, and often other defection attempts are quick to follow. It is those copycat attempts that Luben is to thwart.

Luben arrives in *Shuma* in the summer of 1986 as a substitute adult education tutor at the library's after-hours program. Not coincidentally, Nedra, Capt. Krastev's younger sister and a gifted painter, works as a tutor there while preparing for a budding painter's dream job -- an apprenticeship with the country's most famed painter, Stoyan the "Master" Arabadjiev -- and also studying to join the prestigious National Academy of the Arts. With the assistance of the local party apparatus, led by a Comrade Geshev, the wily Party Secretary, Luben quickly identifies other likely defectors. The group includes Kris's childhood friend Niko and his older brother Petsi, the town's dental technician, as well as Ivan, a former star Philosophy Professor, now fallen from grace, and Mariana, a lesbian truckdriver.

Following a well-planned and executed operation, Luben infiltrates the group and quickly gets a feel for their morale and intentions. And the news is not good. In fact, it's devastating: no one seems to have the slightest intention to defect to the West. There are plenty of intriguing, and illegal, goings-on the border town -- a black market for foreign currency, unsanctioned distribution of Western music, even rumors of drugs -- but nothing related to his mission. After a brief pause to ponder the incompetence of the mission planners, Luben has no choice but to face the harsh reality: nobody planning to defect means there is nothing to prevent. His mission is dead on arrival and so is his only chance at redemption!

Crestfallen, Luben updates his father who, oddly, appears entirely unconcerned. In fact, the old man's first questions relate to the group's black-market activities, and more precisely the drug trafficking rumors. "What specifics have you heard on the narco angle?" he asks. "Just rumors about heroin," Luben answers. "and some Sofia supplier but..." "Splendid!" his father interrupts. "Nothing is lost." His father then proceeds to lay out a new plan of action: isolate the more weak-minded individuals in the group and convince them to defect. "Plan it in such a fashion," he admonishes, "that you personally take the shot during their escape. This way, you would get a two-fold result: first, your superiors would be delighted, and you would've concluded your

mission with excellence. But second, you would personally take back your pride by justly punishing the family which brought so much grief to your, our, lives. Remember, things like Kris's desertion do not happen in vacuum. He must have received support or encouragement from his family. Even if it's merely a permissive environment and libertine habits, that's enough of a seed to corrupt a young boy. Nobody is innocent here! And, please, keep digging into that heroin business!"

If you can't find a defector, manufacture one! Luben is troubled by this blunt directive. Take innocent folks who, on top of everything, have nothing against the State and cajole them to become traitors? But on the other hand, his father's call for retribution resonates with him. It was that cunning Capt. Krastev who destroyed his stellar career and brought shame to his distinguished family. Now Kris's family, who created him after all, should feel the consequences of his actions. Yes, nobody is innocent here!

This is my Rubicon, Luben realizes, the point of no return. If I go through with this now, I will re-gain everything, my name, my life, my world. If I do not, there would be no more mercy, no more chances.

With the new plan, Luben is back in the saddle - concentrated, enthusiastic, and resourceful. He deepens his rapport with Niko, gets close to Ivan, and displays deep compassion for Mariana's struggles as a gay person. His kindness does not escape Nedia's attention. She, and her entire family, have suddenly fallen on hard times. Following her brother's escape, her father is sentenced to hard labor and all avenues of advancement become permanently shut for her, including her apprenticeship with the Master and a spot at the National Academy for the Arts. Nedia finds herself naturally drawn to her new neighbor and colleague, who takes her misfortunes to heart and offers her advice, help and, above all, hope.

Meanwhile, Comrade Geshev, already mistrustful of "outsiders" and paranoid about conspiracies which threaten order, is uneasy with Luben's assignment from the get-go. Not only has it brought a swell of hidden insecurities, but also has triggered a deep disdain and disapproval of Luben's methods of work. "Why would they send him here? Are they unhappy with the job I'm doing, and could they be planning my replacement already? And look at him! The poor fellow doesn't have a clue about the town, the people - anything!"

Having, by law, all power and decision-making in his hands, and being the town's Party Secretary for over 20 years now, Geshev has authored a theory of how to achieve a prosperous, peaceful, and happy society. Aided by an impressive statistic -- during his tenure not a single successful defection has been allowed from the border area around his town -- he has become a firm proponent of an immediate, heavy-handed approach to the slightest sign of dissent and individuality. "When people have questions in their heads," he would often lecture, "they become unsettled, troubled. Therefore, the prompt elimination of any dissimilarity and divergence is the single, most resourceful tool for success!"

On the surface, the Party Secretary follows the orders from above and appears to fully assist the secret agent. Behind the curtains, however, he instructs his largely off-the-books Citizen Volunteers for Peace and Prosperity (CVPP) militia, led by the well-known brute French, to secretly follow and sabotage Luben.

After a while, things begin to work out as planned for Luben. His dedication and skills allow him to make steady progress with the new plan. The trust-building with the group, and particularly with Nedia, deepens. Changing hearts and minds turns out to be a relatively easy task, especially for people in distress, such as the young painter. In addition, Sgt. Melchev -- a legend of the border garrison, who has never allowed a single escape -- is also brought into Luben's confidence to aid with border logistics. Yet, Luben continues to be troubled by his Father's odd curiosity about the irrelevant heroin business and the Sofia supplier, instead of the mission at hand. "Could I be missing something here?" he wonders.

Soon, the entrapment tactic pays off and Nedia, the talented young sister of Kris the defector, is pushed to the verge of defection. On the phone to update his father of the favorable development, Luben again hears a barrage of questions on the drug shipments. Luben confronts his father and in the ensuing argument uncovers a devastating reality.

The Communist regime is on the verge of financial collapse, has been for two decades. Desperate for quick cash, and quite literally, tons of it, the regime has arranged that huge volumes of heroin pass freely through Bulgaria, as part of a top-secret state sanctioned drug trafficking program led by his father himself. This program yields huge profits and has the nice side effect of destabilizing and poisoning the West. But the flow of drugs has sprung a leak somewhere along the line -- heroin has begun to flood Bulgarian streets. The Party desperately need to plug the leak. The illicit distribution ring in Kris's hometown has been identified as a place to start and Luben, expert at infiltration, is just the man to get to the bottom of this.

"So my real mission has nothing to do with defections," Luben utters, his mind in a daze, "you just needed me to ferret out a Politburo-level heroin supplier." Barely able to comprehend the enormity of this, he can only ask why. Why the hell of mirrors, why the mission-within-a-mission. Did you need to lie to me and manipulate me like this? One "cover" for the public, another "cover" for me?

Luben is shattered. "How could you lie to me, hide this from me, your only son?" he shouts through tears.

"You would have rather died at that labour camp than agreed to do this, son." Comes back the all-too-true reply from his father.

The next morning finds Luben alone, locked in his secret meditation room, empty whiskey bottle in one hand, a picture of Kris with his sister Nedia, in the other. His mind, in the throes of despair. Honor, family, trust. Vanished. Duty, faith in leaders, unshakeable belief that you are on the right side of history. Incinerated. My whole world, Luben mutters to himself, is a house of cards. I am nothing but a faceless tool even to my own father. How can I go on? This is the end for me for what is there to hold on to?

But there is one thing left, one feeling all his own. Primal, most primitive, hence most powerful. Revenge, Luben shouts, clutching Kris and Nedia's picture. Kris caused this, and now his family must pay.

And so it must be. When border sirens go off, warning of a defection in progress, Luben is ready to go, ready to stop the defection, even if he has to take a young life in the process.

Luben is at the sniper's nest he had built for just this purpose. The nest overlooks the border crossing. His moves are precise, practiced and efficient. He raises his rifle and aims at the running figure of a girl. It's Nedia! Of a sudden, his aim shifts and he finds himself shooting Sgt. Melchev who is pursuing her as per their plan. The girl makes it across to Greece. Luben is swarmed by the Party Secretary's henchmen who had been tailing him a while.

"Traitor," the Party Secretary shouts as he emerges from behind his associates. "I always knew you're up to no good!" With a flick of his wrist, Luben is thrown into the rocky chasm below.