



# Postmortem Snaps

*Life and death in the old Soviet Union, as seen in black and white.* BY WILLIAM MEYERS

It begins quietly enough. The introductory picture in Jason Eskenazi's photo book is "Hotel Moskva, Moscow" (1998). The lower right quarter of the image is taken up with the naked back and shoulders of a young woman, as well as the little bit of her face and head that are visible as she looks out a window. Behind her is a lace curtain suggesting Old World gentility, and from the window she looks down on impressive buildings of classic Russian style and an open square in which little figures mill about.

Because she is so intent on what is

*William Meyers's photography project, Outer Boroughs: New York Beyond Manhattan, is a forthcoming exhibit at the New York Public Library.*

going on outside, the feel of the image is not so much sensual as contemplative; much history took place in the vicinity of the hotel, and presumably it is that history and its aftermath that absorb her.

**Wonderland**  
*A Fairy Tale of the Soviet Monolith*  
by Jason Eskenazi  
de.MO, 224 pp., \$32

The Moskva Hotel is located within 100 yards of the point from which Russian roads are measured, so it is an appropriate place for Eskenazi to begin his travels. He spent much of the 1990s photographing the lands behind what had been the Iron Curtain: Azerbaijan, Dagestan, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, East Germany, Georgia, Chechnya, Lithuania, and of course, Russia proper. He learned Russian, established friendships, and spent time with Yevgeny Khaldei, the great photographer of World War II whose picture of Russian soldiers planting the red flag atop the Reichstag has

the same place in Soviet iconography that Joe Rosenthal's picture of the flag-raising on Iwo Jima has in ours.

The 77 black-and-white pictures here are nothing like *National Geographic's* scenic vistas; they are meant to illustrate the Stalinist slogan, "We were born to make fairy tales come true"—with the understanding that in the primitive version of the story, the wolf gets to eat Little Red Riding Hood.

By spending as long as he did in the former Soviet territories and becoming as familiar as he did with the people, Eskenazi has been able to produce a book of great intimacy. His work, by turns, is grotesque, comic, surreal, lyric, or elegiac, and sometimes includes several of these characteristics simultaneously. He said in a recent interview that he believes "the image is much deeper in our brain stem than language," and many of his pictures seem closer to the psychological depth of genuine fairytales than to ordinary photojournalism.

They are the sort of images that, once seen, lodge in the mind. And the impression over and over again is that not just the landscape and the urban environment have been damaged, but that the people, too, are in need of repair.

Among the four pictures from Chechnya, "Bombed-Out Circus" and "Rooftop," both taken in Grozny in 2000, show the destruction that buildings in that Muslim republic have suffered, but "Dead Russian Soldiers, Chechnya" (1996) deals with human beings. On the right we see a close-up of a T-shirt being worn by a young man printed with the faces of the four Beatles, and in the background, to the left, is a heroic Soviet-style statue commemorating victory in World War II. In the left foreground, in some sort of open public space, are the bodies of four dead men, the Russian soldiers, one of them lying face down in a shallow puddle of water.

JASON ESKENAZI

We do not see the face of the man wearing the T-shirt, but his apparent insouciance is a measure of the brutality of the conflict in Chechnya. And the sight of John, Paul, George, and Ringo juxtaposed with these casually disregarded dead is an example of Eskenazi's talent for composition.

Soviet health care was once held up as a model, but Eskenazi's pictures of care facilities definitively end that illusion. In "Abortion Clinic, St. Petersburg" (1996), the attractive woman on a gurney in the foreground has a look of resignation on her face, while beyond her a woman lying in



*'Psychiatric Hospital, Kazan' (1992)*

street clothes has her legs spread for a woman in scrubs; there is no more privacy there than in a nail salon.

The walls of the room in "Abandoned Asylum, South Ossetia" (1997) are covered with graffiti and, although it may be abandoned, there is a man sleeping in the single iron bed, his shoes arranged neatly on the floor. The three little iron cribs in "Maternity Hospital, Kuba, Azerbaijan" (1999) are empty, and the only sign of life is a pigeon perched on one of them. This image testifies to Eskenazi's technical sophistication, especially his feeling for light, but so does "Psychiatric Hospital, Kazan" (1992). Dimly lit men with shaven heads sit in gray coveralls at long tables eating gruel from metal bowls, their hopelessness summed up in the figure of a woman attendant in a white smock

standing with her back to them as she gazes longingly out a window.

The pictures of life in rural areas show they have changed surprisingly little from before the revolution. The eight women in "Harvest, Mariel Republic, Russia" (1999) wear what appear to be traditional ethnic dresses and stand in a large field of grain holding scythes. Equally enduring after 70 years of communism are the pagan rituals of people close to the soil. In "Harvest Ritual, Shutilova, Russia" (1999), three ancient women in babushkas sit on the ground "mourning" over a similarly attired scarecrow lying "dead." A draft horse seen in profile in the background reminds us of nature's puissance. And in "Pagan Holiday, Georgia" (1997), a young girl with big white bows in her hair covers her face with her hand and turns away to avoid seeing the severed head of a cow in a nearby wagon.

There are memorable pictures of military personnel in training, of ballerinas at ease backstage, of dachas and graduation celebrations, of movie sets and movie theaters. The torsos of two male figures lie side-by-side in the grass in "Communist Statues, Lithuania" (1998); they have been decapitated, and we can see that they are hollow. In "Millennium, Red Square, Moscow" (2000), a young couple off to the right kiss as they await the future; in the background the storied spires and walls of the Kremlin are lit up and look like Disneyland; in the middle distance dark groups of millennial celebrants shift about, but it is the beer bottles and litter on the cobblestones close at hand that seem to portend what is to come.

In a postscript, Eskenazi writes about the Russians that their inability "to confront their history and loss created a nostalgia for tragedy." This sounds typically Russian, and it is not encouraging. ♦