

# COSSACK IDEALIST

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## CHAPTER 1

So, why should you read the story I want, and need, to tell you about Stefan Denosevich, a lovable, kind and idealistic Ukrainian Cossack private who was transformed into something else by his own hand, and mine, in World War I and in many other forgotten wars that happened soon after it was over? Because you want to know about what really happened to the Cossacks who allowed Mother Russia to become a world power under the Czars then the Red Commissars later? Because the Cossacks, named such after the Turkish word 'kazak' meaning 'free man', represent the boldest, most noble and expressive nature of the Slavic people when sober and on occasion when drunk? Or because you wish YOU could get on a horse and gallop across the Steppes liberating hard working and oppressed people while singing and dancing in the saddle? Or you heard stories about how they lived by their own rules, democratically, and in the service of God, in their own villages in their heyday? Or you're interested in what happened to Stefan Denosevich when he underwent his own experiment with different moralities during an immoral time as an idealist who always saw the best in people, and animals, in the worst of times?

But, first, let me introduce myself, partially anyway, as it connects to the story. A tale which, in YOUR century and continent, has more relevancy than you think, or can easily imagine. As for who I was to Stefan, well, various descriptors can be said. They are, in some way, all true and accurate. I was, and perhaps still am, his teacher and student. His master and servant. Some would say an elderly ancestor born of the once Cossack-run Steppes and a freak of nature whose origins were never known to Ukrainians, Russians or anyone else in his time. Some would speculate that I was a magician who was, and maybe still is, a master healer, torturer and (some say anyway) savior. More about me later.

But first, when you read the word 'Cossack' the image that first comes to mind is a man and his horse, the latter willing to do anything for that man, including galloping into cannon fire. But only at the request of the right Cossack who plunked his ass on top of the saddle. The 37 years still young between the ears Stefan knew so little about people, but he knew horses.

This main character in our story set in the first quarter of the twentieth century was more accurately a small framed but adequately muscular boy in a man's body who could still not grow more than a thin mustache on his angelic face. It was topped off with a cropped head between his elephant ears which featured a non-regulation Ukrainian Cossack warlock that he hid under his tall fur hat when the Imperial Russian inspectors came to inspect the 'Little Russians'. He was an 18<sup>th</sup> century horseman daydreamer born into the late rapidly mechanizing 19<sup>th</sup> century who had Cossack roots and inclinations to be as free as his ancestors had been. His blue eyes complimented his smiling face. His compulsion to serve exhausted him as he didn't know the difference between serving and pleasing. The 30 something 'lad' considered it an honor to serve the Lord while being underserved, and abused, by his fellow soldiers, childhood friends, wife and children.

It is appropriate to begin his story in 1916, while he was serving (and trying to overplease) his fellow Conscripts and 'his Excellency' the Czar, in a Ukrainian Cossack Cavalry unit commanded, of course, by Russian officers.

In his capacity of conscripting unwilling stray or captured horses to join the Imperial Army at the Front, Stefan tried to 'reach an agreement with' rather than 'beat into submission' the steeds. In a war more deadly to four legged equines than two legged humans. Which specific technique would work best to train the newest equine arrival to the corral was up for grabs at the transit Camp half a day's ride on horse, a full day's march by foot and a one hour truck ride from the Austrian lines on a muddy and cold March in 1916 . "An Arab head, with Thourobred legs and Quarterhorse feet, who is trying to figure out who he is and where he came from like the rest of us... who is in conflict with himself, no doubt, " Stefan commented to his fellow conscripts regarding the latest horse captured from the Austrians in the last '(as the newspaper reporters wrote anyway) 'light skirmish',' Where a quarter of the men on both sides were given the opportunity to see first hand if the heaven the priests said admitted bold soldiers fighting for their country with open arms really did exist. The most virtuous of the dead would be reunited with previously departed relatives who made it past the Pearly Gates for a forever joyous Christmas dinner that lasted all year long.

Or if the recently dead soldiers had been born into abusive families or had nagging wives, they would be spared that dreaded fate.

But for the moment, Stefan's attention was on the horse with enlarged eyes and a massive space between them where the gelding could do a lot of thinking, and feeling. "He has a head that thinks for himself, and eyes that have taken in a lot," the master horse trainer and self taught practitioner of veterinary as well as human medicine commented as he gently stroked the mostly healed wounds on the side of the Austrian steed's neck. He blew into the steed's nostrils, singing between breaths a German nursery song which was always a sure fire way to begin a dialogue in verbal commands, or rather 'requests'. Only to have his hairless chin wacked by the horse's snout, with open teeth that he avoided by quickly pulling back. Stefan's subsequent fall was broken by a pile of straw on which there was a generous layer of excrement from the last horses he had brought back into service by ministering to their wounds and their frightened minds. "So, this one can detect my Ukrainian accent," Stefan said by way of explanation as a chorus of laughs came in from his fellow conscripts safely OUTside the round pen.

Wiping what he could from his now brown ass, Stefan leaped back on his feet. He grabbed hold of the rope connected to the horse's bridle. After some tugs and releases, the horse finally stopped trying to take Stefan for a ride through the muck. The proud cut gelding's ears went forward, his front foot lashed at the overgrown Cossack lad, nailing him in his left calf.

"He's a mean one," Seargent Petro Boyko grumbled from the safe side of the hastily built round pen though his oversized cheeks covered with a straggly beard, the air emanating from his somehow always over-fed mouth stinking of an extra ration of breakfast vodka. "That proud cut gelding is more valuable to us as stew than as a saddle or draft horse." He pulled his rifle away from his gigantic over-haired shoulders, aiming its barrel at the thus far, and for good reason, uncooperative horse's head.

"No!" Stefan yelled out, putting himself between the horse who was trying to kick some sense into him and the trigger happy Seargent's bullet. "This horse is shell shocked, or trained to hate people who look like us, talk like us or smell like us," Stefan proposed with the utmost sense of urgency. "I

know that we're in more need of food than the officers are in need of horses, but..." he pleaded with the supply Seargent who doubled as a cook. Who was rumored to put human flesh into his 'Austrian stew' which he sold on the black market for money he put in his own pocket. Of course, such was only a rumor, to Stefan anyway. "Please, let me show you how useful this horse could be to all of us alive," Stefan pleaded. "If treated with kindness, any mean man or beast will become kind, good and useful in good ways, right?"

The Ukrainian Seargent left the decision regarding that to the men under him. like the horse, "So, what do you say regarding the medicine BOY'S' claim regarding human and animal nature? Should we give him the chance to test his theory? A show of hands!"

Ten of the twelve human right arms present went up. Some had been injured by Austrian bullets and others by fist fights with their fellow soldiers during the long periods of boredom between 'noble battles', All of them had been stitched up or otherwise mended by Stefan. A conscript whose flesh was, somehow, never pierced any bullet, bayonet, or shrapnel in any skirmish. Begrudgingly, the supply Seargent lowered his rifle. "Proceed with the experiment then, Private Denosevich," he instructed Stefan. "But if this horse sends you to the Lord in Heaven---"

"---It's because it is God's Will, and you can feed my body to whatever creature needs it," Stefan said taking off his Imperial Russian Army coat, tunic, then his hat, shaking his Cossack warlock at the horse. Bare chested against an early winter wind, he pulled out a carrot from under his sash, offering it to the new equine 'prisoner of war'. It was accepted, but with caution.

"Better to scare or punish that wildie with a shashka," Ukrainian born and bred Corporal Olek Koval said, pulling out his sword. It was a single blade weapon his grandfather obtained from a Tatar freedom fighter in the Caucasus when in the service of the Imperial Army sent by the Czar to liberate the Georgian Islamic 'pagans' so they could be saved by the Russian Orthodox Jesus. "A weapon you only use when charging 'imaginary enemies', 'Doctor' Stefan!" the thin faced, naturally balding

overly mustached thirty year old 'can fix anything you can break, but you owe me a big favor' mechanic continued. "A sword which---"

"---Is still strapped to my side, and which I use to scare the enemy so they run away, or surrender, for their own good so we can advance our noble causes to liberate the oppressed," Stefan shot back. "Like my noble ancestors, Stenka Razin, Kandrady Rulavin, Bohhdan Khemennytsdy and--"

"---Maybe Yemelyan Pugachev, still PRIVATE Stefan Denosivich?" Imperial Captain Nicholi Ivanov shouted as he strode to the coral, his back arched like a White Russian officer from Moscow, in keeping with his aristocratic roots. "A pretender who claimed he was an incarnation of Peter the second, murdered by his wife, Czarina Catherine the Great?"

"And who inspired Cossacks, serfs, peasants, Old Believer priests and enlightened Slavs AND Tatars to rise up against Catherine's oppressive reign!" Stefan proclaimed, proudly.

"And lost, at the cost of his followers' lopped off day dreaming heads," Ivanov reminded the lad. "Yes, Pugachev, a Cossack who was considered a thief, scoundrel and mentally deranged lunatic by many of his own people. Who was as deluded as you are about your blood lines and what the noble grandfathers of yours really did. The factual books say that your Ukrainian and Russian Cossack ancestors actually---"..

"----Did what they had to do under the circumstances, Your Honor, Sir," Stefan shot back while edging a blanket towards the horse, laying it gently on its back. Hiding, or perhaps not believing, the fact that many of his noble ancestors were no strangers to massacring countless numbers of Indigenous pagans while 'civilizing' Yakuts in Siberia and Moslems in the Caucasus if they resisted Russian Orthodox Christianity or paying taxes to the Czar. And putting aside the fact that Cossacks were assigned the special duties of burning live bodies and still populated buildings in Jewish villages. "The books in Moscow are WRONG!" Stefan squeaked out, hoping it was perceived as a bark. "We were fighting for our freedom. And the right to rule our own land in the Steppes!" Stefan continued as he eased a blanket then saddle onto the steed trained by his Austrian masters

to attack Russian soldiers, and conditioned by gunfire to not trust ANYone in uniform. “We Cossacks fought for special favors and freedoms the Czar gave us, yes. But mostly for the honor of serving Christ, Mother Russia and humanity.”

“For which you Cossacks were, and are now, well paid in MONEY!” the White Russian Captain from Moscow added. “And once the money stops, all of you Cossacks will desert and get a better deal from the other side,” the anti-Cossack and even more so anti-Ukrainian officer continued, raising up his clean shaven chin, looking downward at the enlisted Ukrainian ‘Little Russians’.

“No we won’t! desert!” Stefan insisted, after which he sang a Cossack love song to the horse, in Ukrainian in notes that were more off than on key. “Cossacks fight for honor. Not money,” he then proclaimed after having inflicted auditory pain on the horse and humans within range of his voice. “Yes, the Czar is giving special favors to our families back home in Ukraine. Which very soon will be an independent country again. Run by democratic rule in the service of its own people. And in the service of the Russian Czar. Who will bless our independence as Slavs in the service of one God, one world and one common vision for humanity where each gives according to his, or her, abilities, and takes according to his, or her, needs.”

“Of course, you men will not desert,” the Aristocratic-born and conditioned Russian Captain said with a smirk at the Socialist pipe dream which was adopted by an unanticipated number of women as well as penis-bearing ‘commoners’. He looked behind him to the Ukrainian Cossack conscripts, laying his hand on the handle of his revolver. “Right?”

“Yes Sir. Yes, Your Honor,” the unarmed enlisted men answered with bowed heads and forced smiles to the Russian Captain who was known to be the fastest draw in the East AND West. And who had the reputation of being able to put a bullet into the head of any man who even thought differently than he did before that thought could be converted to voice. Captain Ivanov had put bullets into the backs of more than a handful of recruits who knew that it was a smarter military decision to survive a losing a battle by retreating rather than continuing a futile attack. “But for the moment, let’s all enjoy a joke together,” the Imperial Army officer continued.



“Including the ‘good doctor’ who sees the good in everything and everyone who---”

“---Is about to get on this horse and prove to you that even in a demon horse there is an angel who is stronger, Sir, who---” Stefan said, pushing his belly onto, then his ass into the saddle. The horse took three strong strides at a walk, then eased into a collected trot. Just as ‘an agreement’ was in the works, Stefan heard something click under the horse’s feet. “A snake!” he whispered to the frightened horse regarding the legless creature which had been thrown into pen by one of the conscripts, or (according to Stefan, anyway) the whims and Will of the Deity Who created them. “It’s a snake that won’t hurt you,” he assured the steed, after which the Austrian gelding reared up, throwing Stefan on the muddy ground, his head landing in a wad of frozen manure.

A thunderous liberating laughter blasted into the air, shared equally by all ranks. While handing over money from wagers made regarding the outcome of the angelic doc vs the demonic beast ‘showdown’, the Cossack recruits and the Russian Captain made jokes, as equals. Each dig at Stefan was wittier than the last. They included “Shit for brains meets more shit”. “A new method to turn dumb angels into smart devils”. “Sometimes brains need to be shaken up, like borsht”. “A sure fire way to shake some brains into an empty headed day dreamer”. And, from the Captain, “So, you see, our court jester does know how to brighten up our day”.

As Stefan regained full consciousness, he recalled something from his childhood.as the butt of everyone else’s jokes in the village he grew up in where he was always injuring or embarrassing himself somehow. It was an instinct and assigned job granted to him as a Blessing by God. Such made everyone laugh, providing badly needed humor for everyone. Yes, here he was to be a ‘morale officer’ in the same way. Though the insignia of that rank was something only he could see. And the horse who threw him off might see as well. As long as the rebellious Austrian steed negotiated his relationship with his Slavic captors, and feeders, carefully.

“Yeah, I know,” Stefan said, his ass still on the ground, when looking into the eyes of the steed as the horse stood still, staring down at him as if to



say, 'ok, we both aren't where we want to be, so do you have any solutions for this?'.

Stefan smiled at the beast, addressing him with direct eye contact "You, my friend, are like Hershal Kominski, the Jewish tailor and comic who kept us Christian soldiers entertained back where I grew up..The schlamele, which is you, spills the soup on the schlimazel, which is me." He took in a deep breath under his hurting and possibly broken ribs as he edged his way onto his aching feet. "And as for that snake the captain put under your feet, well, that's just a prop the audience put onto the stage. In the service of all of us, including YOU," he continued looking up at the Heavenly Father. "You can use a good laugh too," he said, wiping his aching and even more odorous ass. Enjoying the pain, somehow.