

Andrei Kolesnikov (Moscow)

The Cemetery # 1

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Yesterday, 162 of those who died in the terrorist attack were buried in Beslan. The country leadership wanted to meet with the people at the cemetery, to give them support in the difficult hour. But then they changed their minds. Andrei Kolesnikov, a "Kommersant" special correspondent, is reporting from Beslan.

It felt like I myself had passed to the other world. This morning outside of every house in Beslan there is silence, coffins, and people in black. I walk the town and see the same on every street: silence and coffins. Long tents hang on metal poles over asphalt paved streets. A car could drive under them. Tables and benches will be put under them, when the people come back from the cemetery, for the wake.

I am standing by the house of Albina Tsokaeva, who would have been 12 in seven days. She died having got two bullets in her forehead and a shell fragment in her mouth. She lies in an open coffin nevertheless, because everybody wanted to say their last farewell to her. Her father is moving back and forth between two huge vats in which meat is cooking (earlier in the morning the relatives sacrificed two calves) and the house, at loss how to help the relatives with preparations for the funerals. Usually, the work is done by neighbors who would not let the family to lift a finger. But the neighbors have funerals of their own. They are also having relatives in their house who came to relive them from chores.

Beside me stands the cousin of Albina's father. He is from Gelendzhik. This summer another Beslan girl, his niece, Zalina Albegova was visiting with him. A week before her return to Beslan she got herself a tattoo of the sun on her shoulder. Had she consulted her uncle, he would not have let her. But after seeing the tattoo he decided that the sun is all right, and besides the girl told him the tattoo would be gone in two weeks. She agreed nevertheless not to tell her mother about the tattoo: when it is gone, it is gone.

For several days now they pin all their hopes on the tattoo. On September 1, Zalina went to the school #1. Later, she was not found either among the living or dead. She has gone missing. Ruslan has visited every morgue and hospital around, and more than once, but she is nowhere.

“I went through all the body parts”, he says softly standing 30 meters from Albina’s coffin. “We would have recognized her: by her teeth, by her tattoo. But she is nowhere. And how many people could be put together from those body parts? We, the relatives, came together, pondered. 30? Not more than 40, for sure. But there are 250 missing, we were told. Where are our children? There is a hypothesis.”

He looked around to make sure that nobody is eavesdropping, nobody who should not be in the know.

“People saw our Zalina being thrown out of the window by the gunmen. But she was not found on the ground. Where is she?”

He looks at me hard. I don’t say anything, because I don’t understand what he is driving at.

“The word is that those animals took our children with them. Not everybody, of course. But some have been taken away. Because they had to do something for protection.”

“And where do you think the children are?”

“They could have been thrown out of the car on the way. Think for yourself: why would they need the extra load? And the children are in shock and just don’t know where to go. Or they could have taken them all the way, to keep. But the main thing: they are alive. Understand? But we will find them, anyway. Will you help us? Will you publish their pictures?”

On the table by the vats with meat there lie Ossetian pies.

“Do you know our customs?” asks a tall, old Ossetian man. “Two pies on the table are for grief, three for jubilation. And you know, meat is cut differently for funerals and for weddings. If it is funeral, then the cuts are large... Anyway, there are many subtleties; you don’t have to know them all. For example, Aleksander Sergeevich visited us and understood nothing at all.”

“Alexander who? Does he have a surname?”

“That was Pushkin, the poet. He had written it up afterwards, in detail. Men are standing, waving their hands, crying, but what is the matter he does not understand. In fact, there was simply a coffin in the house. Just like now: the women are sitting in the house with Albina.

“And where is her mother?”, I asked.

“She is in the hospital”, explained Ruslan. “She was in the gymnasium with Albina, and she covered her with her body when the explosion happened. A ceiling block fell on her and broke her ribs and spine. It hurts her too much to talk because her lungs are punctured, but there is a question in her eyes: how is Albina? We wanted to tell her, but the doctors said that if you want to lose her too, go ahead, tell.

“When did the lads go to dig the grave?”, a young Ossetian asked Ruslan.

“They went early in the morning. Everything should be ready by now.” He turned to me again, “Do you know how we do graves? They are like houses. We line them with pointed brickwork with colored joints.”

We are joined by an old man, who points and says, “See this walking man? See him? He looks for his daughter. You know what happened? A terrible thing: he brought her out of the gymnasium and put in a white Chevrolet, and ran to save the others. And he cannot find her for three days now. She was alive, she talked to him. Where then can she be?”

A guy in fatigues brought a mid-size leather case, put it in on the table, and took out of his trousers pocket several rolled up notebooks. He began collecting money putting the donors' names in a notebook. Some would give fifty rubles, other a thousand.

“Don't you think there will be too few people at the funeral?”, asks Ruslan his neighbor with concern in his voice. “I know there are more coming, but it seems like everybody in Beslan is having funerals and everyone has to be somewhere. Had we been the only one, there would have been more people.”

But many have come and more are coming. They would stand silently before Albina's father and grandfather, and then they would embrace them and step aside to let others take their place.

Even today these people are remarkably openhearted. All of a sudden another Ossetian begins telling me that Albina's grandfather is a hero.

"He is a hero not because he fought in the war and was a war prisoner in Italy, but because he had not shed a tear when his oldest son died. And today he is a hero too. His granddaughter has died and he weeps all the time: see, he is in tears right now. But he is holding up, he has not died.", I was told in a respectable whisper.

When the number of the mourners reached about 200, as I estimated it, the coffin was brought out of the house and the farewell began. The women wept loudly, but the men wept too. One of the relatives gave a short speech in Ossetian.

"What did he say?", I asked. "He thanked everybody for coming. No politics", answered the man standing next to me and gave me a compassionate look.

Afterwards, there was more leave taking of the girl. Then, following the coffin, we went to the main street. We passed the school #1, but nobody even glanced at its direction. For this people it has ceased to exist. Albina was taken to the cemetery

There are two five storey apartment building standing next to the school. They share a yard. Yesterday in this yard were held farewells for six people: two adults and four children.

It was raining. The people were standing both under the tents, the same kind of tents put up next to Albina's house, and in the rain: there was not enough space under the tents for everybody.. The women cried embracing coffins with their hands. One of them lost consciousness and was dragged under the tent. I wondered why there was not a single ambulance or a doctor present. That day I have not seen a single doctor in Beslan. They have been all dispatched to wait at the cemetery.

They put a wet handkerchief on the woman's forehead, rubbed her fingers, brought her three glasses of water. There was nothing else they could do for her.

Here, in the yard, they also made their farewells and short speeches in Ossetian. Then they took the coffins to the cars.

The streets were already jammed with people, cars, and coffins. The coffins swam on the raised hands over hoods of the cars and over people's heads. It looked like chaos had begun and the people did not understand anymore where they were supposed to go and what to do. The coffins could not be gotten through to the cars that were to take them to the cemetery. There was nobody to take charge and bring order, as if nobody knew beforehand that today there will be this many funerals in Beslan, and that many relatives and friends of the deceased, and even people not in anyway related to them, would come to the town.

Those who carried the coffins would stop in indecision. They would be shouted at that they should turn, and they would turn, crying, and would stop again. And those who shouted would spread their arms in a gesture of helplessness, and would also cry, helplessly. And all the time more and more coffins were being brought out of the yards and into the streets.

I made it to the cemetery on foot. It is located about a half of a kilometer from the town and is the only cemetery in Beslan.. This half a kilometer takes you along the federal highway Rostov – Vladikavkaz. There is usually heavy traffic on the highway, but yesterday what I saw was mostly people and coffins carried on the raised hands or loaded on cars. Everybody, as the custom is, went to bury their dead at one and the same hour.

There is a large piece of waste land adjacent to the cemetery, and this is where the graves have been dug. By the time I got there, the large field was already dotted by freshly dug graves with people standing around them. All this time the rain continued unabated and had already turned into a downpour. But the mourners were not bothered by the rain: most of the coffins were closed coffins and nothing else merited their attention.

There was no music. There was an orchestra following one of the coffins, but it stopped playing the moment it entered the waste land.

The people strewn across the waste land cried and lowered their children in the graves lined with pointer brickwork, and covered the graves with metal sheets or slabs of concrete. Moans and crying filled the air above the waste land.

In an hour, the flow of people leaving the cemetery became larger than the flow of those just getting there. I too was about to leave. The rain was so heavy that there was almost nothing I could see. And then I heard somebody saying to somebody else, “Look, who are those guys up there?”.

Automatically, I looked around me and was shocked. I had not noticed the podium before because of the downpour. It appeared out of nowhere, like in a movie. I even stepped back when lifting my eyes I saw it standing 20 meters away on the left. The podium was draped in black bound with a red ribbon. Standing on the podium right in front of me I saw a man resembling Prosecutor General¹. He stood holding an umbrella. The first thought that came to me was, “What an uncanny resemblance!” But then I looked at those standing next to him and it became clear that this was indeed the Prosecutor General himself. Next to him stood the Duma speaker, Boris Gryzlov, Chairman of the Federation Council Sergei Mironov, head of the President’s administration Dmitriy Medvedev, the President’s representative for the Southern Federal District Vladimir Yakovlev, Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov, Governor of Sankt-Petersburg Valentina Matvienko, President of North Ossetia Aleksandr Dzasokhov... The only people missing were the Cabinet ministers and the President, but since he had already visited Beslan he did not have to be there.

A famous Ossetian poet whose name I forgot was also standing on the podium and had just begun the opening speech.

President Dzasokhov was next: “We will search for those who did it and for those who directed them, but until we have found them we should remain together and should keep ourselves under control...”

Yuriy Luzhkov explained that those who did it cannot be called animals, because they are non-humans who have raised their hand against children, and that “we, the Muscovites, perhaps understand your pain better than anyone, because we have had the terrorist attack at the “Nord-Ost” and lost there those whom we should have protected. We have had apartment buildings blown up together with people sleeping in them. We feel your pain and we understand that their main goal is to create panic. But we, the Muscovites, did not succumb; we came together and did

¹ “A man resembling Prosecutor General” is a catch phrase of a recent origin. It was first used in a commentary on the tape aired on a government controlled federal channel in February of 1999. The tape featured Yuriy Skuratov, then Prosecutor General of the Russian Federation, or “a man resembling Prosecutor General”, in bed with two girls. Soon after, Skuratov resigned.

not start blaming each other, but stood united against the evil that came into our Universe...”
This last was the theme to which he returned several times.

This was what he was saying and I understood how important it was to make the people, who were busy shuffling earth beneath him, not a hundred meters away, and paid him no attention, understand that revenge is not theirs to take and that they should calm down.

But the people paid almost no attention to those standing on the podium. Around the podium there was security service, journalists, and about sixty of those who, like me, were going back to the town, noticed the podium by chance, and stopped by it.

Mr. Gryzlov told them that the majority of the country could not imagine that such a tragedy could happen, which led me to the conclusion that Mr. Gryzlov realized that there was a minority that did entertain the possibility of what has happened. He asserted that “today our country is crossed by a front line”, and I agreed with him. “But the truth”, said Mr. Gryzlov, “should be defended both on the ground and in the air, in the mountains and on the plane, and this here is exactly the place where it would be appropriate to recall the words of the President of Russia that providing security is the matter the whole society should be concerned with, that...” And this here again, as at the moment I first saw the podium, I began to doubt the reality of what was happening.

Then the meeting was declared over, and the participants descended from the podium. Remarkably, nobody but journalists approached them. The people needed nothing from them. Nobody expected anything of them. They did not even expect them to approach the graves of the Beslan cemetery. At that moment, I realized that this people who flew all the way from Moscow to Beslan for a mourning rally were simply not needed here by anybody.

I kept asking myself, “Why? Why did not they come to the graves? Even just to lay flowers? They were there anyway, so why did not they approach?” Only an Orthodox priest, having come down from the podium, went to the graves squelching through the mud.

Later they told me themselves why they did not. Firstly, for security reasons. They wanted very much, but were not allowed to.

“And then it was muddy”, they told me. “You have seen it yourself: it was raining cats and dogs.”

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