

Mark Rozovsky (Moscow)

The Disastrous Victory

The "Kontinent" magazine, issue 116, October 23, 2003.

The following are excerpts from a lengthy article by Mark Rozovsky, a playwright, a theater director, and the head of a Moscow theater, "The Theater by the Nikitskie Gates". He writes about his experiences as the father of a girl taken hostage by Chechen terrorists and reflects on the causes that led to the death of more than 160 people involved in this incident.

The evening performance of the "A Story of a Horse" was just over at my theater, "The Theater by the Nikitskie Gates". As I was walking to my office, somebody ran up to me, "Mark, turn on the TV". In a minute, my wife, Tanya, and I were on our way.

The taking of hostages at the Theatrical Center on Dubrovka was fraught for me with the most terrible outcome: loss of my daughter. For the last year she had been playing a part in the "Nord-Ost" musical and could be at the Theatrical Center right now.

From the car, I called Lana, my former wife, on the mobile: "Where is Sasha?"

Lana answered in a terrifying whisper:

"In the theater auditorium."

"And you? Where are you?"

"I cannot talk."

This is how the round-the-clock hell of those days had begun.

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I am again trying to reach Lana, with no results. Finally, I have found Sasha's mobile number and am calling her, thirty times in a row, but it's no use: there is no connection.

At the turn to Dubrovka we run into a police cordon line. The traffic police sends us to the Melnikov street, but it is also cordoned off.

I park the car and try to get through the wall of people in body armor and armed with automatic rifles.

"My daughter is there, let me through."

"You cannot without a pass."

"Where do I get the pass?"

"At the headquarters."

"How do I get to the headquarters?"

"You need a pass."

This is a normal catch-22 situation, the kind we have long been accustomed to in Russia. There is no way to fight it. But it is only when you are not an observer, but are actually caught in it, that you really feel your own impotence and insignificance. Still, I try to reason with them.

"But how can I get a pass to the headquarters if you would not let me go there to get one?"

Their answer is no less logical than my question:

"Take your question elsewhere. Do not ask us. We have been told not to let through anybody without a pass, and we do what we have been told."

It drizzles and the street is dark. The crowd outside the cordon line grows. Each new arrival makes the useless attempt to get closer to the building where his or her relatives are in distress.

Nobody official comes to brief us and we know nothing of what is going on. This gives rise to hysteria, panic, rumors, and more rumors. Somebody says there are a hundred Chechens, forty of them are women, and all of them ready to die. They have stuffed the building with explosives and are awaiting the order from Ben Laden to blow it. Sounds not very plausible, but after September 11 any horrific possibility is believable.

A rumor spreads that there are Chechen snipe shooter on the roofs of the surrounding buildings.

“What for?”

“To kill us together with the hostages.”

Another version is that the shooting will begin when Putin comes, any minute now.

“Dream on! Will he come here to make you happy? He will direct everything from the Kremlin.”

“Not to direct, to negotiate.”

“Negotiate with the bandits? He never will.”

“Then all of ours will die.”

“But theirs will die too!”

“It means they will storm the building.”

“That would kill everybody for sure.”

“If this is true, they will not storm.”

Rain continues to fall from the dark sky. Armored personnel carriers and ambulances cut puddles as they drive by us on their way to the theater.

A correspondent of the Echo of Moscow¹ finds me in the crowd. “Would you talk on the air with Sergei Buntman?”

“What can I tell him? I know nothing.”

“Tell him what you think needs to be said.”

I tell Sergei that my daughter is in there, that I am in shock and, as everybody else, fear the explosives will be set off. I fear for the lives of the hostages sitting on the power keg...

“What do you think should be done?” asks the radio anchorman.

“I don’t know”, I say in confusion. “The main thing is to save the people.”

What else could I tell him?

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War in Chechnya? No, war in Moscow. It has come near to each of us and breathes in our noses the revolting breath of death.

All of us standing here in the crowd were strangers a moment ago, but have become united by the common tragedy, and share now the common name: “relatives of the hostages”.

“The terrorists have the one and only demand: stop the war in Chechnya.”

“And nothing else?”

“Nothing else.”

This is strange. I’m no terrorist, but I also want the war in Chechnya to end. However, I don’t plan to blow up anybody to end the war.

“They are scum! They are playing with lives of the innocent people!”

¹ The only talk radio station in Moscow, is rebroadcast in several regions of Russia.

Yes, but it is not only Chechen militants who die in Chechnya: there were Samashki, Starye Atagi, Pervomaisk, and Budenovsk, there are Basaev and Budanov, cut ears and heads, refugees and tears of mothers on both sides. Who can tell for sure, without a close look at each death, which of the sides was better justified, or more guilty, in causing it.

War is evil and terror is evil, and neither can be justified.

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I make one more attempt to get to the headquarters. I find an officer who seems to be in charge of the cordon line. I try to talk calmly: "I can offer to substitute myself for my daughter as a hostage. The Chechens will accept it, since I am more valuable to them. At the same time, I can be carrying out a secret mission for the headquarters."

The officer looks at me as if I am an idiot, and responds in a mocking tone of voice (or, at least, it sounds mocking to me), "Step aside, citizen."

Everything as it should be. All of us are told "to step aside", not to meddle into the Chechen war. Our only part is at the receiving end: to receive our children in caskets. And they have the gall to call us "citizens".

Who are we? Citizens of Russia! Step aside, citizens of Russia!

I again, resolutely, approach the officer, "Maybe you could let me through, or report to your superiors? You see, I need to take part in all these, I am Mark Rozovsky."

The officer responds firmly, in a low voice, "Your help is not needed, Mr. Rozovsky. They have professionals, specialists there. They know what to do and how to do it. They will manage without you and take the right decision. You shouldn't worry."

Later, I realized the symbolic significance of these words, but already after the storming.

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The endless tap-tap of the rain drops had turned puddles into seas. Tanya and I were chilled to the bone. We dashed to a nearby gas station, bought a bottle of brandy to warm us up, and joined a band of young reporters in search of roundabout paths to bring us closer to the theater at its opposite side. There we ran into another, and no less formidable, cordon line, but also into Sergei Yastrzhembskiy, the Putin's public relations aid. I ran up to him and this is what he told me:

“All the children have been freed and are on a bus. Your wife (meaning my former wife, Lana) has been freed and is at the headquarters, together with Nechaev (her husband, former head of the Ministry of Economy, and currently president of a financial corporation, who, fortunately, had enough pull to get into the headquarters).

I rejoice at the news, but not for long. I call Andrei Nechaev, who tells me that, yes, Lana has been freed by *spetsnaz* (no details), but Sasha is not on any bus and remains “there”.

I plead with Lana, talking breathlessly:

“Lana, I am standing a hundred meters from you. Ask Andrei to come out and take me in with him. I can be of help, tell somebody in charge...”

“No, no need. None of these is necessary.”

She hangs up. Of course, she is not herself now: she has been freed and her daughter remains in mortal danger. But she is physically closer now to Sasha than I am!

Suddenly, from the direction of the theater come sounds of automatic rifles fire, then a muffled sound of an explosion... God, have mercy on us! Then there is silence, menacing and unbearable. Thank God, the storming has not begun yet and perishing of the people is not yet unavoidable.

The rest of the sleepless night Tanya and I spent by the TV hopping from channel to channel in search of anything on the hostage situation.

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...The second 24 hours came and went. Some minimal positive developments: a few hostages have been released. But everybody radiates optimism: there will be no storming, and some clairvoyant predicts that everything will be OK.

Couldn't it be that it really will?

From time to time I dial Sasha's number. Who knows what is happening there? A miracle might happen and she might answer.

But no miracles so far. Instead there is reality in the shape of the 18 women wearing suicide belts, each staffed with two kilos of plastic explosives, and with nails and metal balls. They have been already named "walking bombs". The forty children sitting on the balcony, and the adults that are with them, will be the first to be blown into the air and then come down crashing on the heads of those beneath.

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...At 5 in the morning the phone rang. Tanya picked up the receiver.

"Tanya, it is me, Sasha. You probably know that we have been taken hostage. Tell father to gather his friends in the Red Square, this morning, for a rally against the war in Chechnya, or they will kill us off. If there is a rally, they will let us go after 2 P.M., ...maybe...Us – means the children from the cast of 'Nord—Ost'."

Then nothing but beeps. Tanya did not have the time to ask anything, but it was clear from the tone of Sasha's voice and the hurried speech that she spoke as she was directed, not her own words and not in her own voice.

Later Sasha will tell us:

"All the children were on the balcony. We slept on the floor, in between the rows of chairs. We used seats taken from unoccupied chairs as cushions... We had been sleeping when suddenly awoken by a shot... He fired a shot to wake us up..."

“Who was ‘he’?”

“Somebody they had, the handsome one...looked like Ricky Martin.”

“Like who?”

“Father! Like Ricky Martin, the singer.”

“Why did he wake you up in the middle of the night?”

“There was a woman, one of theirs...”

(I noticed that Sasha never called them “terrorists”, as we did, but “somebody”, “woman”. It was not the “Stockholm syndrome”, but rather the child’s avoidance of adult words, an intuitive rejection of politics, of life’s horrors.)

“And what about this woman?”

“She said that we must call home and say what she will tell us to say. She gave us several mobile phones.”

What was I to do? Not to go to the rally? To ignore the night call, to go to bed, and to wait for the “professionals” to free everybody or for the “negotiators” to negotiate something?

I impatiently waited for the morning to come and then rushed to the Red Square. I was responding to the call of my daughter, who was there on the mined balcony, and I could not care less whether or not the meeting had been sanctioned by the Moscow government. I believed that no chance to help the children, however small, should be missed. If “the main thing is to save the hostages”, then let us try and save them, by deeds, not in words. Whether it is a rally or anything else, we should do at least something.

This is why I was surprised to see cops barring the entrance to the Red Square from the Vasilievskiy Spusk.

“If there will be the permission to hold the rally, we will let you through. If not, you will stay here.”

There, by the walls of the Cathedral of Vasily the Blessed, I was joined by my true friends and colleagues, Aleksandr Gelman, Yuriy Ryashentsev, Mikhail Kozakov, Vladimir Dolinskiy². Many others, some known some unknown to me, continued to arrive, but clearly there was not enough of them for an impressive show of force.

There were many reporters and a few TV cameras. All were nervously excited to the extreme.

I gave a live interview to the Echo of Moscow, calling on the Muscovites to come to the rally.

“A bus from Dubrovka with relatives of the hostages is coming...”

“Yastrzhembskiy is deciding with the Moscow government whether to permit the rally, this very moment. Don’t start it yet. The decision will be known in 15 minutes.”

We wait, though not clear for what: we have now enough people to begin. And finally the news:

“Yastrzhembskiy says that to have the rally officially sanctioned at least a thousand people should be gathered.”

Whom did he say it to? Was it exactly what he said? There is no time to go into it. The improvised banners are up, and I am the first speaker:

“Damned be the war! Damned be terror! I don’t want my daughter to die at 14!...”

More speeches, wonderful speeches, are made, and then there is a provocateur speaking:

“The Caucasus to the Caucasian people! Russians out of Chechnya! ... This is your Yeltsin who started the war... Every Russian “democrat” should be put on trial!”

² A playwright, a poet, and two actors.

“Who are you? What is your name?”, I ask.

“I am an Azerbaijani journalist.”

He is lying. I have been to Baku many times and know what the Azerbaijani accent sounds like.

“Get out of here!... We are not here for you to indulge your xenophobia.”

This is the end of our unsanctioned rally. Now we will wait and see whether, after 2 P.M., the children are released.

* * *

They have not been released.

For some, this is a cause to rejoice. For those who believe that the terrorists should be given no concessions. For the organizers of the hostage taking and for those whose hands are now free to use force to free the hostages. The latter have now a strong argument on their side: bandits cannot be expected to honor their part of a bargain.

By the evening of October 25, I came to a sad conclusion: there will be storming, and those who say otherwise lie. Indications confirming this were mounting.

First of all, refusal to sanction the anti-war rally has been an indication that the “professionals” do not want anybody to interfere with their plans. The society should be prepared to accept the use of force and nothing that presents an alternative should be allowed. What the “professionals” need is to convince the public, on the eve of the storming, that every peaceful initiative has failed, and there is no solution but “to strike at the terrorists”.

Vladimir Zhirinovskiy³ is the man to listen to at critical moments: he lets “slip” something that would prepare us for the craziest course of actions. This time, in his radio interview from Iran, he shouted, in his usual manner, his advice: “First, to use gas, then to attack. Those who survive,

³ The leader of the nationalist «Liberal Democratic Party of Russia» created in early 90s, by the KGB, as many believe.

survive. Those who don't survive, don't. They will be in minority!" Whether Sasha will be with the minority or with the majority the scenario does not say.

The ban on live TV reporting from the scene is another indication of the coming storming of the theater. It has been announced that starting from the morning of October 26 the reporting will be of selective character.

Thirdly, we have been told that the terrorist intend to begin executing the hostages starting 6 o'clock in the morning. But who has announced it? Logic of a terrorist act dictates that this important announcement, arguably the most important of those that can be made, should originate with the terrorists themselves. It should have been Baraev⁴ himself to announce it on TV to further the terrorists' intimidation tactics. But he did not: this most terrifying information had come from a second-hand source and has not been confirmed by the terrorists. This leads to the suspicion that this is a fabrication of a pretext for storming the theater, a part of preparations for the storming.

The cordon perimeter is being extended further and further from the theater: 50 meters, then another 50 meters, then another 100... This means they anticipate a battle, an explosion, bomb fragments...

The closer to the morning of the 26th, the louder are assurances that that there will be no storming. But signs of a coming disaster are multiplying. I begin to sense the unavoidability, the imminence of the storming as a physical presence. A place has been prepared to house the wounded... Information has briefly surfaced that the *spetsnaz* is conducting exercises at an identical building (I happen to know this building, the cultural center "Meridian"; we have had many performances there).

The last came the realization, a common sense if a cynical one, that the storming is "useful": it would become a "step in the just, world wide struggle with the international terrorism".

So, everything is going in the right direction, except that there, in the theater, is Sasha, plus 800 other potential victims.

⁴ Movsar Baraev, the leader of the terrorists' group.

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In the afternoon of the 25th I got a call from a Savik Shuster's assistant inviting me to take part in his program "Freedom of Speech"⁵. I felt it was my duty to accept the invitation.

In the studio, I asked Shuster whether it would be possible not to stress that my daughter is among the hostages. "They too will be watching the show and it could affect my daughter's situation." But we were taking unnecessary precautions: I did not know that by then "Izvestia" had already published the full list of the hostages that included, of course, my Sasha.

Ten minutes before we went live, we were warned to mind what we say, so as not to provoke the terrorists who would be a part of our TV audience. I took this advice to heart.

Thank God, I was not alone who felt that evening the growing danger that the storming would be resorted to. Everyone who spoke was of the same mind: senseless sacrifice of lives should not be allowed to happen; the war in Chechnya should be stopped, and not because it had been demanded by the terrorists, but because war is a thorn in the flesh of the people anywhere.

I was very nervous and had not slept for two nights, so what I said for the cameras was confused and inarticulate.

I said that the time had come to be finishing, in deeds, not in mere words, what should not have been started, meaning the Chechen war. Those who hold our children hostage are committing violence, but they are mistaken in believing that only violence can stop violence. However, we too share in their mistaken believe, and because of that are driving the situation into a dead end. Violence gives birth to a chain of violence, and there is nothing but death at the end of this chain.

I said that the Motherland has responsibilities before her children, and if she has been sending them to senseless death in Afghanistan and Chechnya, it must, finally, stop.

"Today, I said, the right step, as I see it, would be, without the rhetoric about how "we care the most about an individual", for the country's leadership to take the political decision to take "redundant troops" out of Chechnya. I am not an expert, and I cannot say what are "redundant

⁵ The talk show running on then semi-independent national TV broadcaster, NTV.

troops”. Perhaps all the troops should be taken out of there... But, I feel it as a common citizen, the President should come before the people and say:

‘Dear friends! Today, to save people’s lives, to free the hostages, I am forced, I stress it, ‘forced’, to do what the terrorists demand.’

I said that, however difficult it may be, there is, unfortunately, no other way that I can see to save the hostages, each one of them. I could be accused of not being a patriot for making such a proposal. But today, when the Jews Roshal and Kobzon are releasing from there Russian people⁶, why don’t I see the Russian “patriots” doing the same?

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What we all had been afraid of the most has begun. My heart was pounding; frozen by horror we were waiting for the theater building to explode. But it did not happen, and it was a victory.

In between the first carefully dolled out reports we see the footage of Apocalypses: the *spetsnaz* soldiers are carrying out of the building poisoned people. Many are unconscious, their arms swinging. They are laid down right at the entrance to the building. Are they dead? Undoubtedly, some are. With my eyes, I am trying to find Sasha in this swirling crowd.

From the early morning to noon we are frantic: where is she? The two announced information telephone numbers are hopelessly busy.

“Call Roshal, says Tanya, he knows you.”

Right, we have met, but still... “It would be awkward”.

“Nothing is awkward: she has been a hostage. It is perfectly all right to call him.”

In a half an hour, it transpires that Sasha is in Rusakovskaya Hospital. At 1 P.M. we are there. Sasha has the IV drip attached to her arm, her face is pale and puffy, but there is laughter in her eyes.

My daughter is alive! She has survived!

⁶ Leonid Roshal, a prominent pediatrician, and Iosiph Kobzon a popular singer, were allowed, at different times, by the terrorists into the building, and the terrorists released several children to their custody.

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129 dead. Is it many or few? The very question is unacceptable.

Ask Victoria Zaslavskaya, an actress from our theater, who for 24 hours had been searching Moscow morgues for her 13 years old son, Arseniy, and found him dead. What would she say?

But I am an immensely happy father today. And I am immensely grateful to the unknown *spetsnaz* soldier who has carried Sasha out of the building.

I asked the chief physician of Rusakovskaya Children Hospital when did Sasha arrived there.

“The ambulance with 8 children arrived at 7.15 A.M. Three of them were immediately put in the intensive care. Your daughter had walked in and even gave her name, Sasha Rozovskaya. We asked her what was her registered residence address, but she could not answer: her consciousness was clouded, distracted.”

This means that, having being gassed just like everybody else, Sasha survived because she got extremely lucky: she was one of the first carried out. Had she remained there for a half an hour or an hour, her fate would have been as tragic, as the fate of Arseniy and Krisitina, who had been sitting next to her.

“Kristina cried a lot!” told me Sasha later. “She was very nervous all the time.”

“And you?”

“I was holding her hand. Holding very tight and whispering to her ‘Stop it’.”

In a few days, standing by the graves of Arseniy and Krisitina at the Vagankovo cemetery, I saw in my mind’s eye, with bitterness and pain, these two children sitting on the theater balcony. Why it should be them, our children, who must pay with their lives for the war in Chechnya? How can we continue living after them and not feeling ashamed of ourselves, both the Russians and the Chechens?

I knew Arseniy from birth. He and Sasha had become a kind of adopted children of our theater. They were always together, and together they went to perform in the "Nord – Ost" musical. On October 5th, Arseniy played there a leading role. He had 20 days of life remaining to him.

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So far, nobody has shown that the storming was necessary as the only way to save lives of the hostages. At the same time, facts indicate that the decision to use force was taken from the outset, the murderous plan based on the unchanging believe of godless people that "end justifies means".

"On Friday evening, re-deployment of forces started at the Dubrovka Theatrical Center", reported "Izvestia " on October 26. "Our source in FSB, who was on duty there, confirmed this information. 'Watch the TV tonight. In a few hours all these will be over', our source promised."

How does this fit with the official explanation that the storming was begun because of execution of two hostages? Or was this alleged execution planned? The security services needed a pretext to start the storming, and if it could not be found, it had to be fabricated.

"The storming was a measure forced by the circumstances", because the terrorists had threatened to start executing hostages. Not true. The truth is that there were no executions. If there were any, why have not we been told the names of the executed? They should have been buried with all the honors accorded to heroes fallen in the struggle with terrorism. There were no funerals because there was nobody to bury. There were no executions, just a fabricated pretext to start using gas. The evildoers had to be shown for who they are, for the good of the cause.

The same cause was served by the death of Olga Romanova, a girl who had rushed to "free the hostages" single-handed. A simple soul! By some miracle she managed to get into the building, drunk as she was, where she was killed... Who is responsible for her death? The terrorists, no doubt. But there is a mystery part to this murder that has not been investigated: who let her through to the building? I was on Dubrovka on the first night, and I can testify that not a fly could have passed through the cordon line. A provocation? Somebody decided: let the foolish girl through, this could play in our hands. A human life can be sacrificed to a larger end, for the good of the cause, of course.

I would like to hope that it was not what happened. But why then the cordon line officers whom the invisible Olga Romanova had passed by have not been held responsible?

In a civilized country, in the country where the authorities are responsible before the people, there should have been not just a general inquiry, but investigation into the death of each of the victims. There should have been investigation into the death of each one who died not as the result of the terrorist act, but because of the measures we had taken to counter it. But it was not for nothing that the Duma refused to create a commission able to investigate and report honestly the circumstances of the tragedy at the Dubrovka Center. The Duma has covered itself with indelible shame.

Seleznev⁷ has put in his say that Savik Shuster went into “hysterics” on the NTV show, on the eve of the storming. He would not understand that we, the participants in the “Freedom of Speech” program, were doing everything we could to save people, while he, Seleznev, had been sitting by the TV set gorging on his own “patriotism” and “steely will”. The “hysterical defeatists” were also patriotically snubbed by Oleg Osetinskiy⁸, in “Izvestia” from October 30.

We know to where these “patriotism” and “steely will” always take us. “We will pay any price...”: we have learned it by heart⁹. We will pay all right, the only problem being that they are not the same people, those who set the price and those who pay it.

Some victory! They lost 40 and we lost 129!

Some would say, “But there could have been more casualties! If not for the gas, everybody would have died.”

No, my friends! Nobody would have died, if not for the gas.

* * *

⁷ Genndiy Seleznev, then speaker of the Duma, a Communist party deputy.

⁸ A screenwriter and a journalist.

⁹ Here the author quotes not President Kennedy, as an American reader might assume, but a popular war song by Bulat Okudzhava, a Russian poet and singer.

“We have not been put on our knees”, said the President. Well said. “We could not save everybody...” In fact, we have not even tried.

I agree the situation was a most difficult one, but this was precisely the kind of situation that puts to the test everything we are and have: our spirit, culture, patriotism, conscience, the sense of duty.

The chaos that followed the storming is not a product of imagination of the “hysterical defeatists”, but a classic example of criminal negligence and irresponsibility demonstrated by the counter-terrorist operation planners. As aptly put by Zhvanetsky¹⁰, we have “power exercising bodies”, but what we need are “intelligence exercising bodies”. Is there an explanation why our “professionals” failed to think through the rescue part of the operation? Of course, they expected casualties, but not on this scale.

The “Alpha” *spetsnaz* assault group, who had their gas masks on when they entered the building, should have been followed by a medical battalion armed with syringes on the ready. Everyone in the building should have received a shot of the antidote¹¹. But they did not even have stretchers, just a few of them. There were only 80 ambulances, not nearly enough for 800 poisoned people. They loaded 100 people on 5 buses, and many of these people did not make it to the hospitals alive. The buses were immediately named “death buses”. What was happening inside those buses on the way to the hospitals could be known only to the Devil himself who had been visiting the gas chambers of the Auschwitz.

Now, everything can be blamed on the terrorists. But murderers among the terrorists could not begin to compare with the murderers on “our”, so to say, side. Everybody is afraid of calling the spade a spade, but I repeat: it was possible to try and avoid the mass murder of our own by our own, to try and avoid the storming.

Incidentally, there was no storming per se. There was a swift gas attack that made combat unnecessary. Of course, there was more gas released than necessary. There is a justification for that: not to give time to one of the suicide bombers to set off the explosives. Indeed no explosives have been set off, but why?

¹⁰ A popular satirist.

¹¹ Reportedly, the gas used was Kolokol -1 developed in the 70es by the KGB. It is believed that it is based on Fentanyl (used for anesthesia) and/or Carfentanil, both highly potent opiates. One of the known effective antidotes for an overdose of opiates is Naloxone. (Wikipedia)

This is a very serious question. Many of the hostages, indeed a majority of them, said that they had heard shots before they passed out. It means the terrorists had from 15 to 30 seconds to realize that these were their last minutes¹². Besides, being dispersed through the auditorium they did not pass out simultaneously. Had been they waiting for the order that never came? This seems unlikely, since, more probably, the suicide bombers were given the discretion to act on their own at the critical moment: each were given the opportunity to depart to the Paradise as a happy revenging hero. This was what they came there for.

Why then they did not blow up the auditorium? At the very least, they could have killed a half of the hostages just spraying the auditorium from their Kalashnikov rifles, or throwing in a half a dozen of hand grenades. They did not do it, why? Why did not they choose martyrdom, the death for the cause? Because, as they said from the outset, they did not want to commit suicide: “We don’t want to kill you. We want you to stop killing us”. A strange kind of terrorists! On one hand, they are scam, bandits who have taken hostage seven hundred innocent people; on the other hand whom did they actually kill, except for Olga Romanova used as a stooge? Let’s have some names!

Were their explosives real explosives? This is the main question. If the explosives were real and the terrorists chose not to use them, they deserve to be called martyrs. If the explosives were fake, did the security services know about it? And if they did not and believed the explosives were real, storming was completely unacceptable, because there was no guarantee that the gas could assure success of the operation.

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Each day I am being asked both by people I know and by complete strangers, “How is your daughter, how is Sasha?”

They expect me to answer, “Everything is fine, she is in good health”. I oblige and sometimes add, “Everything is in the past”.

But it is not strictly true: her blood tests are unstable. One day they are normal, another day they are not, and this may last for a long time yet. Consequences of severe poisoning are

¹² Probably the terrorists had had much more time than that to act, since, as reported by the hostages, some of them had put on gas masks.

unpredictable, something may surface in a year or three, or even later. The only hope lies in the strength of the young body to resist.

A knowledgeable doctor told me, “This is like Chernobyl: nobody knows how it will turn out”.

Sasha had found in herself enough strength to cope with the death of Arseniy and Kristina, which surprised even her psychologist, who said, “Your daughter has enormous psycho-physical resources”.

I don't know whether it is true, but she went, almost straight from the hospital, to the burial service for them at the church at the Vagankovo Cemetery. I think that what this 14 years old girl went through in those days would have been enough for some adults to last them for life.

Today, Sasha behaves and reacts adequately; her wounded soul heals and matures. We don't press her to tell us “what was there like” and are satisfied with what she tells on her own, and she is reluctant to talk about it in detail, at least for now. But of course she cannot forget her experiences and it shows in small incidents, details.

Recently, we were standing by the elevator door when it opened and our neighbor came out: Ignat, a fine young man, who studies law at the Moscow University. He grew a short black beard and, by chance, was dressed in a fatigue jacket. Sasha recoiled as if stung.

Or another similar incident. She went with her new friend, Alisa, to the premier performance of our theater's new play. There is a comic scene there, in which a policewoman shoots a blank in the air during an encounter with a hoodlum. The whole audience burst into laughter, as if on a cue, but Sasha, at the sound of the shot, hid her head behind the back of the seat in front. She was the only one in the audience who reacted this way.

“Sasha, - I asked her recently - would you like to play the girl in my musical ‘Perfumer‘?’...”

“No, father”, she responded firmly.

“Why not?”

“I don't want to play a victim”.

I was flabbergasted, but decided not to argue. Some day, of course, I will try to explain to her that with this attitude she cannot be an actress. This would mean to forego playing in many a play of the world's theatrical repertory, because heroines of the greatest plays, more often than not, are but "victims".

But I will not try it now. Time heals, life goes on and brings new experiences, and this is where the hope lies.

However, I can understand my Sasha: to be a victim is unbearable, neither on the stage, nor in life...

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[TO THE CONTENT PAGE](#)