HOWARD KANEG

No Boundaries, 2005
Acrylic on Canvas, 65 x 65 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST, PHOTO: DAVID REESE

ALAN CHEUSE

Hakodateyama

Arrived at port: harbor of Hakodate, largest city on Hokkaido, Japan's northern island, where the winds blew cold and smelled of salt and wood smoke.

Japanese men in uniforms took him from the ship and sat him down in a small office in a wooden building near the pier. He showed them his military passport, and they nodded, and chattered. He understood nothing they said. Within a few minutes the men departed, leaving Philip with his thoughts, and a long while passed before they returned, accompanying a wiry man old enough to be Philip's father, who spoke to him in Russian with a Moscow accent.

"Captain, is it?" he said.

"Yes," Philip said, and stated his credentials, and noticed that his hand stayed steady as he offered the man his military passport.

"I am Anton Shscherbitzky," the old fellow said, extending a hand. "It will be a while before they finish looking over your document." As though he had done this many times before, he led Philip to a small room off the main hallway. There, someone had prepared tea for them, and they sat down at a table, Philip watching the steam rise from the cups set before them.

"Tell me your story," Shscherbitzky said.

Time passed in dreamlike fashion as Philip gave the white-haired visitor a brief account of the harrowing events that had brought him here: how he had trained as a pilot in the Red Air Force; how he had been shot at while rescuing a fellow pilot shot down by marauding Muslim rebels in the desert near Khiva; how he had taken a bullet, he had survived and gone on rest and recuperation; how he had found himself posted to an air base in Khabarovsk, from which one morning he had flown out over the Sea of Japan, and as if in a dream of a dream, had headed out over international waters.

Philip found himself trembling, the teacup shaking in his hand, as he recounted to the old man what had happened next—how he had intended to turn around and head back to Russian soil, even as his oil light told him he had lost most of the fluid, and despite his best intentions—"No, no, worst," said the old émigré—he had crashed into the Sea of Japan.

"My mechanic," Philip said, "he nearly killed me."

"You think it was just an accident?"

"What was it?"

"It was an opportunity sent from who knows where," the old man said. "What happened next?"

A Japanese freighter, the Kyoto Maru, had found him standing knee-deep in seawater on the wing of the sinking airplane, and the crew had plucked him from the sea and the captain had delivered him to Hakodate.

"Destiny?" the old man said. With a surprisingly deft motion for his age, he crossed himself, all the while staring at Philip.

"An accident, from which I was miraculously spared?" Philip said. He recalled the clouds, the pewter-bright sea, the rush of the salt waters around his legs. There had been no God in sight, except for the sudden appearance of the Kyoto Maru.

Was this the way it had happened? He still wasn't sure.

Eventually an officer returned with his passport.

The old man said, "We can go now."

He led Philip to the door, where one of the Japanese officials conducted them to another office. There, one of them stamped Philip's passport and wrote something in Japanese beneath the stamp.

Off they went in an old car with—of course—Japanese markings, up from the harbor into the hills above the town. The man drove slowly, and Philip, exhausted to his bones, closed his eyes.

"Most of us live here," the man said, as Philip awoke to look out on the city and harbor below. "This district is called Hakodateyama..."

Hakodateyama. Houses of wood, mostly; one and two stories. Hills to the west, the sea beyond, harbor to the east. That same sea salt and wood smoke perfumed the air all around, and the winds blew consistently cold despite the summer season. From here you could see the curve of the harbor almost around to the cape of land to the south.

An old island, which had arisen from volcanic eruptions and earthquakes a million million years ago, and which now served as a place of refuge for a small community of Russians who had fled from home after the rise of the Bolsheviks—this island just far enough away from the homeland to keep the exiles out of danger, just close enough to make them long all the more deeply for a return they might never live to see. Or had Hokkaido broken off from the Russian mainland and drifted in some ancient volcanic maelstrom of a sea to its present location—like the Russians themselves?

Like Philip.

He felt like a broken part of things, to be sure.

The old man gave him a small room in his house, where he lived with the young Japanese woman he had married—he explained all this—after his first wife, sickened by separation from her family and tormented by exile, died here in Hakodate. Philip had access to the man's substantial library of Russian literature, and after breakfasts of sweet rice and tea, his first days passed in a mixture of reading, some letter writing, walking, and walking and reading. When he and the old man walked to the overlook at Cape Tachimachi amid broomweed and thistle, sea birds overhead, the cold sea waters glistening at the bottom of the hills, he could lose his thoughts in the sea, which flowed south to the main island and east back the way he had come, lapping at the cliffs of the country he wondered if he would ever see again.

He wrote letters to the rabbi inquiring about his mother's health, but was afraid to post them, worried that back home there might be repercussions for anyone hearing from him, and worried also that the government might try to track him down. He wasn't sure about the Air Force, but he knew that the commissars had long arms. A northern Japanese island was just far enough away for him to feel terrible loneliness about his separation from his home country, and the wisdom of his host to the contrary, just close enough for organs of the state to reach out for him—Philip's military training taught him that.

It also made him see that he was a deviant. Adding to the misery of this humiliation was his lack of money. His host drew on some reserve that had kept him fluid since the years of his own separation, and gave Philip a small allowance, sparing him the added disgrace of beggary. On an early morning walk, with the winds still carrying the chill of night whirling around his head, he saw himself for what he was—a traitor, saboteur (a charge tacked on by the political wing whenever anything else came up), a homeless, wandering Jew.

At night other exiles dropped by, and the talk turned to politics and literature, the latter much more interesting to Philip at that time, but the former giving him great worries.

"Consider Tolstoy?" one of the elders said at the end of a long evening of conversation about the greats of the Russia they had left behind.

"Ah, Tolstoy," Philip's host said with a sigh. "When I was an arrogant sprout I met him. He was still in his physical prime, a dashing fellow, fine military bearing that came from his aristocratic roots. You could imagine him rearing up on his mount and slashing with his saber as the horse came down on top of you!"

Philip listened in awe, thinking that he would have given almost anything if he could have met Tolstoy.

But then what if he could have met Pushkin? Or Lermontov? Or Doctor Chekhov? Or even the dark anti-Semitic Dostoyevsky—would not those occasions have thrilled him just as much?

No, no, he thought to himself, dreaming in place; he would have given all, everything, for one meeting with the Master of Yasnaya Polyana. But as soon as he thought about the master's estate, about which every Russian schoolboy knew, his mind turned cold and his heart quivered. How could he ever visit it, if he could not return to his home country? Every morning he walked to the cape, sometimes as birds flew lower than he stood on that cliff, imagining himself as a child might, leaping off the promontory and flying above the sea.

One evening's conversation flowed into another. After a while it seemed to him his host could read his shivering thoughts.

"Young Philip?" Shscherbitzky said.

"Yes, sir?"

"You have been here several months now." Months? Philip said to himself. It could not be months! But it was, it was…

"Do you plan on staying on this freezing island with the rest of us, staring back across the Sea of Japan like some Odysseus and hoping somehow for the overthrow of the Reds?"

"What am I to do?" Philip said. "What am I to do?" He was a hero, or at least he had once, not so long ago, been a hero—but now he despised himself for the weak and whining tone in his voice. "I have lost an airplane, I have lost a country, I have lost myself..."

"I made a mistake," Philip said as he had been repeating all this time. "As did my mechanic. I want to go home."

His eyes went blank, as did his thoughts, while the older man went on.

"If you return," said Shscherbitzky, repeating to the group a joke he had now made many times when Philip had expressed his worries, "Comrade Stalin may ask you to reimburse him for the cost of that airplane you lost in the sea."

He raised his fist and made his hand into the shape of a gun, which he politely pointed at his own temple rather than Philip's.

"Phhht!"

The others laughed, as only exiles can laugh—bitterly, and with passion. The old man cackled hoarsely, too, then washed his bitterness down with a large sip of tea.

Philip tried to laugh, but something about the truth at the bottom of that joke gave him a shock of awful fear, and he too drank the bitter tea.

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After many hours and weeks of wandering through the high grasses on the point overlooking the sea and casting his mind back home with little good effect, and after many weeks of good Russian company which made him feel only more deeply enmeshed in the gloom of his immediate exile, and after meal after meal of beet soup and rice, rice and beet soup, sometimes with fowl, sometimes not, a shower of good fortune fell on Philip's head.

In response to a letter, written on his behalf to some high official he knew in Shanghai by his Hakodate patron Citizen Shscherbitzky, came the offer of a job flying the post for the new China Mail Service!

A celebration ensued, which consisted of Philip and his host and their small circle of émigrés drinking a great deal of vodka, and some rice wine when the vodka—heaven desist!—ran out. Within days, Philip, still not fully recovered from his farewell party, posted a letter to his mother, and boarded a small steamer leaving the Sea of Japan for the China Sea. The first night out he did not sleep well—the stink of the toilet in the small cabin interfered with his rest. So up and early he was, pacing the deck during the relatively brief journey, staring at the water, thinking: oh there it was I splashed down! No, there! Or, There! The water heaved and rolled in a seamless surge, giving no sign that anything had ever happened here except ships passing; and overhead, the sun and clouds and rain a canopy for the surging water and turning globe. His life so far! He had not made a mark!

A white seabird swooped over the deck, depositing a white splotch of guano on the otherwise spotless deck.

There! Philip said to himself. Perhaps I have made *some* kind of mark, something akin to that lovely bird's swift dropping! The shit dropped, dropped the way I fell out of the sky!

Alan Cheuse is the author of five novels, including *To Catch the Lightning* (winner of the Grub Street National Book Prize for fiction for 2009), several collections of short stories, *The Fires,* two novellas; *Fall Out of Heaven, a memoir*; and a collection of travel essays—*A Trance After Breakfast.* Cheuse serves as a book commentator for NPR's evening newsmagazine *All Things Considered,* and as a member of the writing faculties at George Mason University and the Squaw Valley Community of Writers. His 1986 novel *The Grandmothers' Club* will appear this spring in a revised edition under the title *Prayers for the Living.* "Hakodateyama" comes from a novel-in-progress.