

Dwellers of the magic car

By: Felix Lupa

I came across her, the magic car, one afternoon, on the fringe of Nahalat Binyamin, (a street in center of Tel - aviv) during the last days of the great cold. She was hidden in a small side street; amidst old dilapidated houses with decrepit, peeling walls...an old wreck of a car, rusty, dirty, her windows shattered, covered with old sheets and blankets to keep the cold out. She was standing in a small parking lot in the back yard of an old, abandoned apartment house, surrounded by waste- collection containers, old food cans with rotting food remains, plastic bottles and human and animal excretions. There, inside that car, I saw the three of them: Boris (the blind), elderly Ghenadi and Sasha....



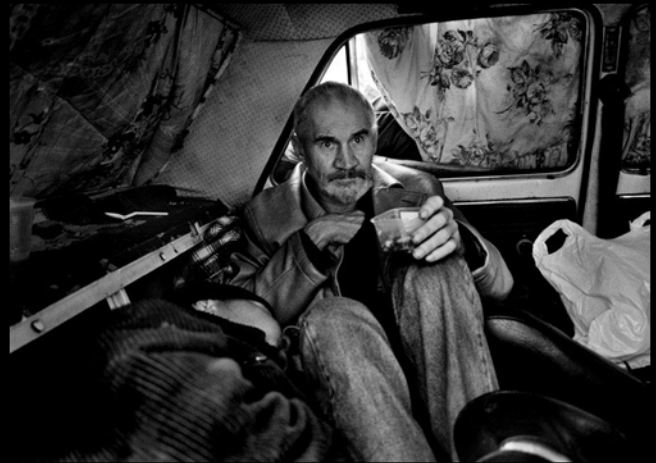
Days later I learnt that Ghenadi was the owner of that car, and that it was his home. He paid 500. – Shekels (about 150\$) to the previous owner for this ownership right. Apparently, there are no free gifts even for the homeless. In this global world everything is a business and has to comply with the rules of supply and demand...

Since then I have been going back there almost daily - to talk with them, document their lives with my camera, add one word to another, one fact to the next in order to reconstruct the story of these men and their "magical palace".

This is a harsh story, complex and not easy to stomach. But it deserves our attention: this is how people live on the fringes of our society, educated, intelligent people, not criminal, not bad, just unfortunate people, survivors of bad fortunes, of modern life. They deserve our attention, and even a measure of respect: the distance between them and us is not as big as we tend to think.



Boris is blind. Now he is completely helpless. He can do nothing without help, but he was not always like this. He spent ten years of his life working here. Only his bad fortune brought him to where he is now. Ghenadi, about 70, formerly an engineer and a high ranking industrial manager in Russia, is now homeless. He takes care of Boris with devotion. Sasha lives with them, but during my association with them he disappeared. This is how they are: if they can, they come and go. There are others who come to visit this strange "palace", homeless men and women. They come to talk, beg for a cigarette, to sleep in the car for a couple of hours. Some are welcomed, others are turned firmly away by Ghenadi. He probably knows why. Boris is treated with infinite devotion by Ghenadi; he goes out every day to work (mostly to beg), and brings food, drinks and cigarettes. Every now and then he comes with a change of clothes for Boris, and he helps him in everything; he guides him, keeps him company, and protects him from others to the best of his ability.



Boris is 54. His story sounds like a modern version of Job, (Book of the Bible) almost. About ten years ago he arrived in Israel from Kirghizstan; he wanted to work, save some money and return to his country. Until he lost his sight he worked hard, diligently, and honestly, saving one penny to another, sending some money to his family whenever he could. The list of jobs he undertook is long and varied. He did not bother about questions of honour or hardness of the jobs he undertook. He just wanted to work, persistent, determined and humble. How did he end up in that shelter of the homeless?



Here is a summary of his "occupational life" as he told me:

During his first three years here he worked for a car-wash company. He earned well, enough to rent a small room to live in. But good things, so it seems, don't persist forever: the company closed down, and Boris found himself without work. After a month or so he found work in a Tel Aviv restaurant, and some time later his fortune smiled on him: one of the regulars of the restaurant suggested that he come to work for him. So Boris found himself working at a fruit and vegetable shop in the open market of Petah Tikva. At first he worked as a simple hand, carrying merchandise and arranging it, but later he was promoted to the role of cashier. But here again, some time later, his boss left on a leave, and the relative who took charge of the business did not like the status Boris had earned for himself and started picking on him and making his life miserable. In the end he could not stand it anymore and left back to Tel Aviv. There he worked for several months for an independent contractor as a street sweeper, and later on he was sent by a manpower company to work for a Yeshiva in Jerusalem, where he did kitchen and cleaning jobs. From there he was sent to do similar work in another yeshiva, this time in Modi'in (a city near Jerusalem). He

did not stay there for long, because of wage problems.

By then seven or eight years had gone by, and Boris decided to go back home. He made all the

arrangements, put his papers in order, bought a ticket for a flight to Kirghizstan, and took out all his savings (6000.-\$) out of the bank. He believed that in a few days he would be back in his country and all his plans for which he had worked so hard would be realized. But alas, at that moment his luck failed him again. Perhaps the goddesses of fortune thought that the life of that innocent and hard working man had been too easy...On the last day of his stay in Israel- or so he thought-he went for the last time to visit the sea-shore carrying all his possessions



with him. While there his bag, with all his papers, passport, flight ticket and savings, 6000.-\$ in cash, were stolen!!!...the fruit of eight years of hard labour was lost!!! All his dreams evaporated in the flame of a harsh, unexpected new reality...

Boris remained with, literally, no penny to his name, no documents and no way to contact his family. Three of his sisters and a 28 year old son live and work in Germany. But his address and telephone book was gone and he could not remember their addresses or telephone numbers. He was thus cut off from his family.

At loss Boris turned to the immigration police, hoping they might assist him in getting back to his country. He was held in jail for about two months and then was freed. He was given a form which he was instructed to fill, and advised to contact members of his family as well as his country's authorities in order to obtain the



documentation required to verify his nationality. Having completed all this, he was to return to jail to present the required documentation and arrange for his exit from the country. He was given a one way ticket to Tel Aviv and this was all.

Now what was he to do? He could not turn to his country's authority: Kirghizstan has no diplomatic representation in Israel. How was he to complete all these assignments having neither money nor any connections here?

He thus reached Tel Aviv penniless, workless and without a place to pass the night in. He had to find some work as soon as possible and save some money. Otherwise how could he proceed to sort out his affairs?

Wandering helpless, hungry and penniless Boris met an acquaintance from a previous job and that person introduced him to an elderly lady who needed general repairs and renovation works in her apartment. When he completed the job and the woman wanted to pay him, Boris suggested that instead she could let him stay temporarily in her house in return for odd jobs. She agreed, and Boris stayed with her for two years doing all cleaning, laundering, ironing, cooking and repair jobs for her.

Why he failed to write to his family in Kirghizstan? Why he did not make an effort to locate his sisters and son in Germany? Why he did not make an effort to find a way to get travel papers as he was instructed by the migration authorities? To all these questions I have no answer. Some of the answers are obvious, about others I can only speculate. He lost The addresses of his family members in Germany with the rest of his documents. He did remember the address of his sister in Kirghizstan, but what could she do for him? He had been sending money to her, how could she now help him? Perhaps he was ashamed to tell her that now he had become helpless and in need of help? He forgot in his pocket the form he was given to fill when he laundered his cloths. Anyway, how could he complete these forms with his very limited Hebrew? Contacts with the authorities intimidate him; he is not used to dealing with them. Boris is a gentle and timid man. His country has no delegation here, where could he turn for advice and help? At a loss as to what to do he probably just drifted, staying on with his land-lady, until the next blow fell.



About two month before I met him, and after he had stayed some two years with the lady Boris's eyes started to fail; he was losing his sight rapidly. Within a month, or a month and a half, he became almost completely blind. Now he had become a burden to his land lady, and she turned him out. Apparently, she did not offer help in examining and treating his eyes. Perhaps she could not, being elderly and of rather modest means. Boris did not say anything. When helped he thanks you in a quiet voice, his blind eyes shining, but he makes no recriminations; about hardships, insults, injustices and humiliations he tends to keep silent.



Thus wandering, blind, on the street Boris met Ghenadi. He had never met him before. Homeless, penniless, but not merciless, Ghenadi invited Boris to share with him all the little he had, and ever since they had been together in the old car, Ghenadi's "palace".

Boris shut himself in the car. He now hardly goes out. He relieves himself a few steps from the car, and even to do this he needs Ghenadi to guide him. The stench is terrible, but what can he do? Ghenadi begs in the streets and takes odd jobs in the market and thus he is able to bring food, drinks and cigarettes. Good people, some of them homeless themselves, also bring food sometimes. The municipality's authority for street dwellers knows of the case. Now and then somebody from the authority pops up bringing blankets, sometimes food. Once a doctor came- Boris does not know who called him- and said that only a simple

operation is required to restore his sight. But the doctor went and Boris stayed where he was. He has no money, and, being blind, no way of earning it. Nor does he have medical insurance. Apart from Ghenadi he knows nobody who may be able to advise and help him.



Here I tried to step in and help. I increased the frequency of my visits to them in an effort to ease their life, even if for little, in the car that never goes anywhere. I spoke on the phone with the municipal

authority for street dwellers. They know of the "case". But as Boris is not an Israeli citizen, the authority cannot open a file for him and assign him a social worker.

I brought them a small transistor radio, and this greatly cheered them up. Now they never stop listening. For Boris the radio is his only pipeline to life outside.

I obtained a simple blind- man stick so that he may get out of the car and walk a little. He comes out of the car with my or Ghenadi's help and tries to take a few steps, but his legs are heavy and he moves with difficulty as he stays all the time in the car in the same cramped position. He walks all hunched up as if afraid of a sudden blow to strike unexpectedly. His condition is deteriorating.

ophthalmologic private clinics) in an attempt to obtain an eye specialist who would be willing to examine Boris's eyes, pro bono, and give us a reliable diagnosis as well as an estimate of the cost of an operation. (He promised to look into the matter and return to me, but I have not heard from him ever since then).



I brought Boris a pen and paper so he could write to his family. I could not help him write. I had to look for somebody who could. Later, Tatiana (a homeless acquaintance) came and wrote the letter for Boris, and I posted it. Who knows how long it will take it to make this long distance to Kirghizstan? Will the people there reply? Will they be able to help?



Yesterday when Ghenadi was away, and Boris on his won, somebody came and snatched the transistor. Boris heard laughter, but, obviously, he could not see who it was. How low can people stoop?! The greatest fear of homeless people like Boris and Ghenadi are the drug addicts. With these, although they too are homeless, they don't want to have anything to do. Drug addicts will stop at nothing. They fear them and do their best to avoid them.

But now came at last a bit of good fortune; I have discovered the "Organization of Doctors for Human Rights", a voluntary organization which attempts to furnish medical care to all those who do not qualify for it in the eyes of the authorities, Palestinians, people without documents, work migrants, homeless people. We called them and they are ready to arrange for an examination by a specialist who does voluntary work for the organization.



A date has been set for the examination in "the Doctors' House" in Tel Aviv. I gave Ghenadi some money so that he can take Boris to a homeless shelter in Jaffa, where they can wash and have a change of cloth in preparation for the visit to the doctor. I came to visit them at noontime and found Boris alone, half naked, shivering and frightened. At night they had "visitors" again; they forcibly undressed Boris and Ghenadi, searched them and the car and robbed them of the little money I had given them.. These were probably drug addicts. That same evening we went to the doctor's clinic, and this time there was some good news to be happy about. Dr Rosenblatt said that the reason for Boris's blindness is a "mature cataract". She said he would have to have another examination, and then an operation to remove the cataract. If there are no other problems with his eyes he will be able to regain full function of his eyes and be return to normal life. She was prepared to approach the management of the hospital and discuss with them the possibility of a pro bono operation for Boris. At the Organization of Doctors for Human Rights they are also trying to look for other possibilities, just in case.



Now another blow: The shop owners of the neighborhood –so one of them told me–got together and decided to remove the "shelter car" from the backyard where it stood. This is not the first time; it is they who had shattered the car's windows. Where would they take the car? To the street and from there it would be taken to the municipal garbage dump, he said. And what about the people who live there? This is their problem; the filth and stench are intolerable, he said, and it drives their customers away. This is not completely true; the car is in a back yard, customers are never disturbed by that shelter. It is only the shop owners who are inconvenienced by these conditions when they park their cars and take them out. It is a fact that the power is in their hands...but what will happen now? What will happen to Boris and Ghenadi...?

Yesterday at noontime I went to see them: the car was gone. Boris, Ghenadi and some friends were sitting on the pavement. The shop owners had called for a municipal inspector, a small crane was brought and the magical car, the "palace" of the homeless was no more. Their wretched shelter, home, life-centre was destroyed in one brief thrust. The dwellers were able to take one old blanket each and this was the end. It was not however the end of the story of Boris and Ghenadi.



As Boris and Ghenadi were sitting in the street I was busy all afternoon and far into the evening making phone calls, trying to find some solution for them. The Doctors for Human rights could not help this time. They have no lodging arrangements. I tried the municipal authority, but the only solution they offered were "the shelters for the homeless", "gagonim" (small roofs). Many of those who stay in those shelters, however, are drug addicts, and Boris and Ghenadi would not hear of staying there. They would rather sleep in the street. To stay in one of those shelters is dangerous-

they say- especially if you are old and weak, or blind. All other calls turned out equally futile. But maybe, after all, God helps the poor and the meek. As a last resort I called a Christian organization which operates a one-weekly "soup kitchen". They offer quite decent free lunches, as well as medical examination by a G.P. and some basic medical help. I asked for their help and after a couple of hours of tense waiting the man in charge of the place, Merlin, came back with a solution.... They found an apartment in Jaffa the inhabitants of which are all street dwellers who were undergoing rehabilitation processes and who were ready to receive Boris and Ghenadi and take care of them without a time limit and for free.



It was already dark when Merlin, the man in charge of the poor-kitchen came, called a cab and took Boris, Ghenadi and me to that apartment. It was already around 9.00 when we arrived there. Yuri opened the door and invited us in. The apartment was spacey, rather modest, but at least a place with the smell of home. It was well lit, in the corner was television set with a Russian film on. One by one the dwellers entered and exchanged greetings and warm hugs with Merlin. They seemed to know him well and like him. Everybody was smiling. I looked for a reaction from Boris and Ghenadi. It seemed they were still in a state of choc. They needed time to digest what had happened; just a few hours ago they had been thrown out of their "home". They were, apparently, still confused. They looked a bit shy, perhaps intimidated...

Yuri, the man in charge of the apartment, welcomed Boris and Ghenadi and announced, "This evening you will have a hot shower, a change of cloth and an evening meal. You will sleep here on clean sheets. "I will take my shower in the morning" said Ghenadi "I always shower in the morning". Immediately he got a lecture from Yuri. Obviously the urge to enjoy a good hot shower fades after living on the street for a while. One cannot be bothered anymore; to scrub off a kilo of sticky dirt is rather tiring work. But Yuri would not hear of it, and as always good old Ghenadi got up and led Boris to the bathroom, he helped him undress and washed him like a good nurse.

When they returned clean and relaxed and sat down Ghenadi asked for a cigarette, but, there again Yuri made it clear to the newcomers that here there were some house rules: "Here nobody smokes, drinks alcohol or

uses obscene language. You are now joining a rehabilitation programme, he asserted. All the others here have come to this apartment in a similar state; maybe even worse, all of them are in some stage of weaning from one bad habit or another. All the people you see here have reached an advanced stage: they lead independent life, they work, participate in social activities and they study. This apartment serves as an anchor for them, a base where they could always return, without a time limit. "At first" He added "Ghenadi and Boris will be taken to a private house in the North, there to begin the first stage of



rehabilitation. It takes about 9 months. The house is located in a quiet secluded countryside area, and this is what you need now "he concluded. When I explained to Yuri that Boris needed to be available on a short notice for the examination at the hospital, he reassured me: "There will be no problem; we will bring him to Tel Aviv whenever he is needed".

It was around eleven when I left. "Today a chapter in their lives has closed" I thought. I left feeling comfortable. They are in good hands. May they never go back to live in the street. It was the end of a chapter for me too. But the story has not ended; there are still two tasks ahead: getting somehow financing for Boris's operation and putting his papers in order so that he will be able to go back to his country.

Tomorrow I will get in touch with Dr. Rosenblatt and see whether there is any news, I thought.



"We have an operation" announced Dr. Rosenblatt" on the phone." I have taken it up with the hospital's Director and he authorized a pro bono operation". Blessed be those who still have a heart and conscience in their chests. Not all is bad after all.

Boris will have to be at the hospital on Sunday for preparatory tests. A date had already been set for the operation, Wednesday 19.3.

On Saturday Boris was brought to the apartment in Jaffa. I went to visit him. He was clean and well dressed. His beard had been shaved. He seemed to be feeling well, but worried; he did not smile and seemed absentminded. "Everything is well" he said in a quiet voice in reply to my question "Ghenadi is well too". But Boris never complains. "Only living without cigarettes is tough" he said smiling weakly. "I will be O.K.". The apartment's inhabitants were friendly and seemed to be taking good care of him.

On Sunday we went to the hospital for the examination. We were accompanied by Leonid; he is one of the men living in the apartment. In the past he used to work as old and handicapped peoples' help. He came with us to help and translate from and to Russian. The reception at the hospital was heart-warming. The entire staff was full of good will, willing and able to overcome all bureaucratic hurdles. Boris was greeted with warmth and good intentions. Blessed be all of them.

The good news is that the blindness is caused by a cataract. There seems to be no internal damage. Boris is going to be able to see. Tomorrow is the operation!!! Maybe the story of the "shelter car" will have a happy ending...

Wednesday early morning, the sky is still grey; the road is almost completely empty, only a few early risers walk, bent against the cold, half asleep are to be seen. Boris should be at the hospital by 7.30. He will be the first to be operated on. I reached the apartment in Jaffa by 6.45. The apartment was dark. Most of the men were still asleep. We looked for Boris, but he was not there, disappeared. Nobody knew where he was. "Has something happened? Did he go out on his own and got lost? Worried, I woke up Yuri and we questioned all the men in the apartment. Then we were relieved. It transpired that Leonide and the driver had taken Boris in the car and gone to the hospital in order to make sure they are on time. They did not know that they were supposed to wait for me. I hurried after them.

The hospital was dark, a bit gloomy. At the entrance I noticed several colourful figures: an old ugly witch, a beautiful girl, a snow-white, a little Red Riding Hood; some of the staff and some of the children hospitalized for treatment had put on masks for the Purim Holiday, a holiday of joy. Will Boris have a reason to feel joyful today? I hurry to the eye department. Boris is already in the operation room. Leonid had taken care of all the arrangements. Dr. Rosenblatt smiles "Sit down, relax, in about 45 minutes Boris will be out" she says encouragingly.

The corridor near the operation room is gloomy. It is bare and functional. No ornaments here to relieve the eye. "Entrance for Staff Only" says the sign on the door. What is happening behind these walls? Is everything going to be alright? Is Boris going to be able to see as before? Will he be able to see right away, or only after a few days? weeks? Questions and apprehensions crowd my mind. I get up and go to the cafeteria to have a glass of coffee.

Half an hour dragged by. We got back to wait near the operation room. And then, suddenly the door opened, and there was Boris in a wheelchair. He was dressed in hospital green, a cap covering his hair, a transparent plastic protection cover over his right eye and a big smile on his face. Beside him stood Dr. Rosenbaltt, her face glowing. The miracles she brings about have not become a matter of course for her; her happiness is making her face glow." Is he able to see?" I ask. "of course!" She says smiling. "Do you recognize him" she asked Boris "Yes, this is Felix". It is more than two months that he had known me, but this was the first time he saw me. He knew my voice, though. The atmosphere in the room was reminiscent of that of a delivery room after a baby is born. In fact a new man has been born today. There is no profession better than this" Says Dr. Rosenblatt with a big smile "there is no greater happiness than restoring sight to a blind person" "Perhaps the happiness of the person who got back his sight is even greater" I think to myself.

"Boris had only his right eye operated on" the Doctor explained " This is always the practice. After a time, when the eye has healed and is fully operational, the other will be operated." "When? We will have to wait and see".



Boris was happy, but he seemed bit overwhelmed, confused. "Do you want to eat", we asked "No I am O.K" he said, and then changed his mind. We went with him to the department's dining hall. He walked without help but he was a bit shaky. He tended to bump into things and we need to watch over him a little. Asked how well he saw he answered "narmalna", normally. But as usual he played down his difficulties. Later on it was explained to us that at the moment his sight is not yet completely restored. His brain requires a certain period of time to get used to the new situation. Everyday his sight will improve a little until it is fully restored. But even now Boris was eating without help. Every now and then he looked around studying his new environment. Two elderly Yemenite ladies were sitting not far from us. One of them had her second cataract operation not a long ago. Her good looking daughter was with her. They talked and laughed merrily, looked at us and start up a conversation. Boris was interested and smiled quietly. Later he asked to go back and lie down. He was tired. He needed to wait in the hospital till noontime before he could be sent home. When he passes near a mirror he looked at his image and remarked jokingly "I am looking like and cosmonaut". Sitting on the bed he described to us the experience of starting to see again "It was like an explosion" he said waving his hands to demonstrate.

At noontime I went again to the Jaffa apartment. Boris came back from the hospital with Leonid. I found him sitting, surrounded by his new friends, watching the television. He had bee instructed not to strain his eye. But the temptation was too great. Tomorrow will go again to the clinic at the hospital to have a check. His friends at the apartment will see that he gets there on time. I will visit him again. In a few days he will return to the house in the North, where he will rejoin the rehabilitation programme. Ghenadi is waiting for him there. I wonder about his meeting with Ghenadi. I wish I could be present there!!! He will see Ghenadi for the first time in his life, Ghenadi who took him into his "magic car", who cared for him, watched over him, was a friend whose generosity had no bounds. He was for him father, mother and brother, his only family. But all he knew of him was his voice, a voice to light his way in the darkness. What will he think when he sees him? What will pass in his mind?

Here ends the story. I will keep in touch with Boris and Ghenadi. Boris will have to undergo another operation on his left eye. Let us hope the hospital authorities are able and willing to see the wonderful and generous deed they have begun through to it completion. I will do my best to keep in touch with Boris and

Ghenadi and help them until Boris is able to go back home well and whole, and Ghenadi is perhaps able to go back to a better life than life on the street.



Before we conclude here is one further piece of information that I have heard from Boris accidentally. Boris is a Jew, a fact that he failed to mention to me, and that neither I nor the hospital's authorities ever bothered to inquire about. During a conversation after the operation he mentioned casually to me that his mother was a piano teacher, and a Jew. Why he had not registered as a Jew with the immigration authorities I have no idea. Maybe he will tell me sometime later on. There are a lot of things I do not know about him, and even more to learn about Ghenadi and his life's story. How many stories hide behind the dirty and tattered appearances of people like them whom we pass lying in the streets, seeing and not seeing them, trying to avoid them, being intimidated by their strangeness and their dirt...

What can we learn from all that? Maybe that there are good people among us...Maybe that among those who have lost all, their homes, their livelihood, their families, generosity and the will to help still exist? And maybe, as we wrote in the beginning, that they are just people like us. Many of them have interesting, may be even fascinating life stories, and the difference between us, "normal" people and them is smaller than we would like to think. Maybe that helping them is possible, and that they are worth the effort?