

**AN INTRODUCTION TO**  
*The Kitchen Boy*

The time: July 1918. The place: The town of Yekaterinburg, just on the Siberian side of the Ural Mountains. In the Ipatiev House, the former Tsar of Russia and his family live imprisoned by Bolshevik soldiers. As a loyalist army presses toward the town and the Romanovs pray for a rescue that will never come, their captors receive a stark authorization from Moscow: Nikolai, his wife, and their five children are all to be shot to death. This is the story, recounted in all its vivid and terrible drama, of Robert Alexander's novel *The Kitchen Boy*.

Although the general facts surrounding the captivity and murder of the Russian royal family have long been known, some key gaps in our knowledge have continued to raise curiosity and fuel speculation. When, in 1991, the secret mass grave of the Romanovs and four of their attendants was discovered, two bodies—those of the Tsarevich Alexei and his sister Grand Duchess Maria—were not found. Remaining unrecovered is a family suitcase packed with thirty-six pounds of priceless jewels. There was yet one other remarkable disappearance. Mere hours before the Romanovs and their servants were led to their deaths, the family's kitchen boy, fourteen-year-old Leonka Sednyov, was ordered away from the Ipatiev House. He was never heard from again.

Combining these mysteries with a meticulously researched body of facts, Robert Alexander has crafted a tale of intrigue, tragedy, and betrayal in which all appearances are utterly believable yet nothing is quite what it seems. The story is recounted by Misha Semyonov, a recent widower now in his nineties who fled to America during the tumult of the Russian Civil War. With death approaching, Misha wants to set the record straight for his granddaughter and for the world at large: he is none other than Leonka, the vanished kitchen boy. Eighty summers ago, he carried a series of secret messages between the ex-Tsar and a band of potential rescuers, and, on the night of July 16–17, 1918, he bore witness to the royal massacre. But Misha must face his own issues of guilt, truth, and deception. Although he has resolved to convey “a

thousand truths” to his granddaughter, will he dare to disclose the ultimate, shattering facts of his own existence?

Seen through the youthful, astonished eyes of Leonka but told by the cynical, misanthropic voice of Misha, the novel allows the reader to know a family that discovered greater nobility in its squalid exile than it had ever known in the gilded palaces of St. Petersburg. But *The Kitchen Boy* is about more than history—it is also a deep and moving meditation on the nature of evil and the power of forgiveness.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Alexander is a pen name of R. D. Zimmerman. A graduate of Michigan State University, Mr. Alexander has also studied at Leningrad State University and has lived and traveled extensively in the former Soviet Union. In researching *The Kitchen Boy*, Mr. Alexander gained access to Russian archives and palaces that are closed to the general public. Under his own name, he has written numerous mystery novels, including *Hostage*, *Outburst*, and *Innuendo: A Todd Mills Mystery*. Robert Alexander currently makes his home in Minneapolis.

#### A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT ALEXANDER

*1. Your book is the product of some extraordinary research. Was there any information that was particularly hard to find? If you could have just one missing document, what would it be?*

First of all, I should say that doing the research was perhaps the most enjoyable aspect of writing *The Kitchen Boy*. There’s just so much information out there—so many books, memoirs, biographies, archives, photographs, and newsreels—that it was a privilege to dive into such fascinating material and call it work. Ninety-five percent of what I sorted through was not difficult to find primarily because Nicholas and Alexandra were perhaps the most well documented royal couple in history. I say that because in addition to writing numerous letters

and keeping daily diaries, their lives were captured by many of the newer technologies. For example, the entire Romanov family was crazy about photography, and the royal children each had their own wooden Kodak camera. Amazingly, they left behind 150,000 family snapshots, all carefully glued into albums—and that's not even counting the official court photographs. You can see a handful of these photographs at my Web site, [www.thekitchenboy.com](http://www.thekitchenboy.com).

The only thing that was hard to find was information on the kitchen boy, Leonid Sednyov, who was removed from The House of Special Purpose just a few hours before the Romanovs were murdered. Several guards later testified that they saw Leonka, as the boy was known, across the alley in the guardhouse; they claimed he spent the night there and remembered seeing Leonka crying and curled up under a coat. The next morning he vanished, and it seems that no one made any serious attempt to find him. As the only survivor of the Romanovs' captivity, he could supply us with so many answers (who wrote the secret rescue notes, how were the two suitcases of imperial jewels smuggled away, did the Romanovs really expect to be saved, and more). A reader recently wrote to me and said she'd heard that Leonka died of typhus in 1929, and that he'd left behind a short memoir. If such a memoir still exists, that's the one document I wish I could have. Part of me believes, however, that if Leonka's memoir were out there, it would have been published long ago.

*2. In your novel, your narrator says something surprising about cross-cultural perceptions. He says, "The truth is that Americans cannot possibly begin to understand the depth of the Russian soul." It seems to me that many of your readers will want to achieve just the kind of understanding that your narrator says they can't have. Is Misha just being difficult, or do you believe that there really is a psychological profundity that only another Russian can recognize?*

What an excellent question. Yes, Misha is just being difficult, but in doing so he is, to me, being so very Russian; as I know them, Russians take remarkable—and remarkably smug—pride in the mysteries of their culture. I love Russians for their dramatic, emotional nature. They're not afraid to love, not afraid to get hurt, not afraid to exaggerate or act impulsively. Much of that, of course, is due to the extraordinarily tragic times they've lived through, from wars to revolution to rapidly changing political systems. In other words, they have an outlook and value of life that has, by and large, been shaped by tragedy. A small example of this is that many Russians spend money as quickly as they get it, and I believe that's due not only to the

Soviet era where self-dependency was not encouraged but also, more recently, to hyperinflation and devaluation. I have a one hundred ruble note that in 1990 was worth \$165 but today is worth maybe two cents (to me it's priceless as a bookmark), so obviously Russians have learned the hard way that there's no point in saving.

I should add that Russians and Americans always seem to get along very well on a one-to-one basis, and that, I think, is because we are both from great, expansive countries that are the most multicultural in the world. At the same time, however, there are many fundamental differences between us that continue to amaze me. One of the great mistakes we make is that we try to understand Russians in the context of European culture, when in truth Russian culture and society is historically more Asian than it is European. I've heard many Russians say that their country is not an Occidental one but Oriental, from which, they insist, they received mysticism, fatalism, and turmoil.

*3. One of the fascinating qualities of Misha as a character is that he wants to be both known and unknown; he desires to be secretive, but he also wants to talk and talk. What are your thoughts about Misha's simultaneous love and dread of communicating?*

So who doesn't want to tell a secret, particularly one that's been burning in your heart for decades? Actually, only very few people want or even succeed in taking a secret to the grave; most feel a need to confess as a way of lightening their souls, as a way of preparation for the hereafter.

And yet Misha's situation is actually quite different. Yes, he revels in finally revealing to his granddaughter so much of what he witnessed in The House of Special Purpose, and he is painfully delighted to relate what he knew about the Romanovs. But ultimately Misha is quite devious. He knows Kate will discover the items that are hidden in the house, he knows that if he didn't tell Kate anything she would have more questions than answers, questions that quite possibly would lead her to the ultimate truth. And that scares him, not only because he doesn't want his granddaughter to come to hate him, but, more importantly, because he's determined to protect her. So in reality Misha's so-called confession is actually his attempt at creating a penultimate truth, or more specifically, his attempt at creating a false truth that will be forever believed. Simply, his reason for telling Kate his version of the story is a very determined and planned attempt at controlling the future from his grave.

4. *Even when a historical novelist makes it very clear, as you have done, that he has written a piece of fiction, readers may still turn to the book in hopes of finding some form of truth. You have written a book in which truth and falsehood richly intertwine. Is there anything you would like to tell us about the problem of “truth,” either for a historian or for a novelist?*

Facts alone are not the only way to discover truth. Indeed, I think stories that open both mind and heart are perhaps the best way to a greater truth, and therein lies the beauty of fiction.

The problem of “truth” regarding the Romanovs is that I don’t think we’ll ever find it, I don’t think we’ll ever know what really happened in those final weeks and, in particular, on that grisly night they were killed. Three great mysteries exist that the facts cannot solve—who wrote the secret rescue notes that Nicholas and Alexandra received and responded to, what happened to over thirty-six pounds of famed Romanov jewels, and, most critically, what really happened to the Tsarevich Aleksei and Grand Duchess Maria? To me it’s an incredible story—who could make up something like this!—and these still-unanswered questions are what compelled me to write the novel.

By the very nature of their profession, historians are of course forced to remain focused on the hard facts, but when the facts are skimpy or missing, it’s difficult to create an accurate picture of what really happened. In fiction, however, one is not so constrained. As I wrote *The Kitchen Boy*, I could speculate, I could probe and imagine, I could ask “what if” and play that out. Also, I think it’s important to recognize that most facts are, essentially, the result of human decisions, which are determined in great part by a person’s emotions and feelings. And while the territory of emotion is a nebulous, even dangerous one, for any historian, it’s fodder for a novelist.

Virtually all of the books on the Romanovs are nonfiction, which is why I wanted to do something different. The works of historians are priceless, of course, but historical fiction is often more accessible to the nonscholar. It also allows the reader to experience the events vicariously, to feel them and see them, rather than study them and potentially get bogged down in minutia. While we know via the facts what happened almost every day of the Romanovs’ captivity, I wanted to use the magic of fiction to breathe life into those sweltering days, hours, and minutes, and thereby give readers another point of entry into the tragic story of Nicholas and Alexandra. We know the facts, but what did it feel like, what were their hopes, how did they

interact? Not all of us are lucky enough to find our wisdom while we're still on earth, but I do think that Nicholas and Alexandra, who made many downright stupid mistakes, did in fact come to a greater understanding of their lives. And that, ultimately, is what impresses me about them and what I wanted to explore fictionally.

*5. One story you have chosen not to tell us concerns the married life of May and Misha. Given the, shall we say, unusual circumstances of their coming together, how do you imagine them as a couple?*

In my imagination I know almost every aspect of their lives. Simply, May and Misha are an utterly devoted couple, united by tragedy, truth, forgiveness, and love. May's love for Misha is much cleaner and purer, for in her soul she has come to terms with the events and resolved them, put them at rest. Misha's love for May, however, is more complicated—he's devoted, absolutely so, but he feels an even greater sense of obligation to her. Misha can't let himself forget. In fact, he's determined not to.

There are many things I know about May, Misha, and their granddaughter, Kate, that I either have written about in my writing journal or know in my mind but chose not to include in the book. Simply, there was very little I could write in the present that could compete with the actual story of the Romanovs. To paraphrase Shakespeare, the fall of royalty has forever been the grist of entertainment, and to me the fall of Nicholas and Alexandra is so very tragic because no matter their good intentions, every step was a misstep.

In developing May and Misha and what they lived through, I came to believe that every century has a crime that defines it. For example, by leading humanity down a path no one had imagined, the events of 9/11 seem to have already defined this century, not only because they were so unbelievable, but because they have determined the primary focus of the world ever since and perhaps for years to come. In the very same way, I think the liquidation of the Russian royal family—Nicholas, Alexandra, their five children, four attendants, pets, everything and all except, strangely, their kitchen boy—was a defining event for the last century because on that very night the individual became expendable for the supposed sake of the collective. Thus a terrible page in history was turned, and the stage was set for the mass liquidations that followed all over the world. In Russia alone tens of millions of people perished at the hands of Stalin, and then of course another twenty million or more Russians died in World War II. Just terrible.

6. *In the Ipatiev House, everyone is under constant surveillance and your characters would suffer horrible penalties were they to say what they think. What were the challenges of writing a narrative in which so many thoughts and emotions have to be repressed?*

The main challenge was to identify and create a sense of tension, the key ingredient needed in any book. In my opinion it's the element missing from too many contemporary novels, for without tension there is no pace, no reason to turn the page, and who doesn't like a compelling book, not to mention a page-turner? I think tension in a book is more important than ever because these days there is so much competition for the "moment" from television, videos, computers, the Internet.

Of course, the main problem in telling the story of the Romanovs is that their last months and days were horrendously boring. As Nicholas himself said, each day stretched on and on, one no different from the other, much like the monotonous days on a ship. To address the problem of tension, I focused on the opening paragraph of Chapter 1 in which Misha claims that not only is he the kitchen boy, but that he knows where the two bodies of the missing children are to be found, for, as he claims, "I took care of them with my own two hands." For anyone interested in the Romanovs, that statement packs a wallop, hopefully enough to draw one immediately into the book. Thereafter, I focused on the slow release of information regarding the secret notes and the jewels, at the same time always keeping my eye on the ball: the night of July 16, 1917. Actually, let me be even more specific. The whole crux of the book, its primary source of tension, is captured in this statement: if Nicholas and Alexandra's kitchen boy had survived, what would he be able to tell us?

7. *The murder of the Romanovs is somewhat like the assassination of JFK in that, on one level, everyone knows what happened and, on another level, no one knows what happened. What was it like to construct a story that is at the same time so familiar and so mysterious?*

Like walking a tightrope, frankly. There are so many intimate details—and so many people who know those intimate details—that I had to be especially attentive and careful of the facts. If a reader spots a mistake, then nine times out of ten they let you know! For example, I got a four-screen email from one reader who said he would have enjoyed my book but there was no wheelchair in The House of Special Purpose. I wrote back and gently broke it to him: yes, there

was, I have a photograph of it in the dining room. Essentially, as I wrote I knew I couldn't blow my credibility, for a single mistake in the facts would break the sense of story and verisimilitude.

8. *Readers who are familiar with Russian literature may sense a certain Dostoyevskian undercurrent in your prose. Are you conscious of a stylistic influence deriving from the Russian masters? Do you feel as if you have written a "Russian" novel?*

Would that I could be so talented, but really my only goal was to create as realistic a Russian voice as possible so that the story would, in turn, be as believable as possible. Sure, as a Russian language major I've read all the great pieces of Russian literature, but what I relied on to develop Misha's tone and point of view were actually my own experiences and impressions over the nearly thirty years I've been traveling to Russia. I studied at Leningrad State University, I worked for the U.S. Information Agency in Russia, and for over twelve years now I've been a partner in a St. Petersburg business. I travel frequently to Russia, I speak with my Russian partners numerous times during the week. So I drew on all those experiences as I wrote, and whenever I wasn't satisfied that I had found a "Russian" way of writing the story, I simply called St. Petersburg and asked which way was up.

9. *Your book is reminiscent of Crime and Punishment in that it centers on deep, inexpressible guilt, but also suggests the miraculously redemptive power of love and forgiveness. In this horrible, brutal story, May's power to forgive apparently offers us a pathway out of the darkness, but that path seems to go dark again when Misha kills himself. Why did you decide to have him finally reject the forgiveness that has kept him alive for eighty years?*

Author Edvard Radzinsky so clearly writes of this, warning of "the dangerous courage of the Russian soul—it is not afraid of sin." In other words, Russians have a fundamental belief that the only way to find the redemptive power of love and forgiveness is to sin. The guilt that follows throws one unto the feet of God, where one eventually finds holy deliverance. Misha makes mention of this halfway through the book—sin, torment, purification; sin, suffering, forgiveness. It's a critical aspect of Russian Orthodoxy, and this is why Russians sometimes refer to the "joy of suffering," for it is the light that shines the way to deliverance.

Yes, May has found the pathway out of the darkness. She recognizes the sin, she sees the suffering, and she believes it has been purified, that there is reason to offer forgiveness. Misha,



however, has only pretended to forgive. What has kept him alive all these years is not merely his sense of duty to his family, not any kind of purification or holy deliverance, but the torment, the suffering, which he experiences by remembering that night over and over again. In essence, he's stuck in step two of three—and he won't let himself get unstuck. He has committed a sin, he has suffered greatly, but he is determined to continue lashing himself and wallowing in torment. And that is exactly why he commits suicide, for the last thing he wants is to go on to the third and final step, forgiveness. Instead, he goes back to step one by committing another sin, actually one of the greatest in Russian Orthodoxy. He's that determined not to find salvation, but to suffer for all eternity.

*10. The Romanovs' story is one that often makes people—including the kitchen boy in your novel—start sentences with the words, "If only . . ." Do you have a favorite "If only . . ." regarding the Romanovs?*

Yes! In late February of 1917, Nicholas gathered a handful of ministers, including Prince Golitsyn, the Prime Minister, and announced that the next morning he would go to the Duma and grant what everyone had been demanding: a government accountable to parliament. Nearly every noble and revolutionary recognized this change as the only way to avoid complete catastrophe. A few hours later, Nicholas changed his mind, presumably dissuaded by Alexandra, who was convinced that autocracy was best for Russia and who was fiercely determined to leave the system intact for her son. So instead of going to the Duma the next day, Nicholas quietly left the capitol for military headquarters. And a few days later, revolution broke out.

What if Nicholas had not changed his mind? What if he'd offered these concessions and granted a constitution? In my opinion there would have been no revolution or, at the very least, one not nearly so catastrophic.

*11. This novel is likely to whet your readers' appetites for more. Are there any nonfiction studies of Nikolai and family that you especially recommend?*

Please turn on your computer speakers and take a look at the trailer at [www.thekitchenboy.com](http://www.thekitchenboy.com). In addition to some historical photographs, a more complete bibliography follows the trailer. Otherwise, here are a few of my favorite works of nonfiction on the subject:

*The Fall of the Romanovs*, Mark D. Steinberg and Vladimir M. Khrustalev (Yale)

*The Last Diary of Tsaritsa Alexandra*, Introduction by Robert Massie (Yale)

*The Last Tsar*, Edvard Radzinsky (Doubleday)

*Nicholas and Alexandra*, Robert Massie (Atheneum)

*Nicholas II: The Interrupted Transition*, Helene Carrere d'Encausse (Holmes & Meier)

*Tsar: The Lost World of Nicholas and Alexandra*, Peter Kurth (Back Bay Books)

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did you respond to Misha as a character? How did your feelings toward him change as you read the novel? Do you feel sympathy for him? Why or why not?
2. Misha's tape-recorded recollections are complicated by the passage of time. He observed events through the naïve eyes of a teenager, but he retells them from the perspective of a jaded elderly man. How does the distance between seeing and speaking affect his narration?
3. Misha is a man of harsh judgments—of his country, of Communism, and ultimately of himself. Do you agree with his judgments?
4. Early in the novel, Misha says that truth is one of the three values that enable America to save itself. Recognizing the saving power of truth as he does, why is Misha incapable of telling a true story? Would telling the truth make his salvation possible?
5. *The Kitchen Boy* describes both Nikolai and Aleksandra as being “blinded by religion,” and it tells of one of the key episodes in the rise of an officially atheistic state. Nevertheless, can it be argued that *The Kitchen Boy* is, at heart, a religious novel?
6. In *The Kitchen Boy*, the Romanovs bear their sufferings with almost saintly forbearance. Does their acceptance of suffering make them nobler in your eyes, or does it merely deepen their status as pathetic victims of history? People sometimes talk about the redemptive power of suffering. Does suffering redeem anyone in this novel?

7. *The Kitchen Boy* offers a great deal of commentary on what Misha calls “the Russian soul.” Did this novel help you toward a different understanding of what it means to be Russian?

Nations are made up of millions of individuals, and yet those individuals do share an invisible connection. Is it possible to speak coherently about a national soul?

8. In Misha’s view, “a great curse was unleashed” on the night of July 16–17, 1918, “inundating every corner of [his] vast homeland.” In what sense can the subsequent path of Russian history be understood as being the product of a “curse”? Do other nations, America included, suffer beneath their own national curses?

9. Imagine *The Kitchen Boy* as the basis for a screenplay. Choose a scene and discuss how you, as the director, would want to film it.

10. Late in the novel, Misha reflects that forgiveness is “the last thing” he desires; he does not want it at all. Why is he unable to accept mercy?

11. What is your response to the ending of the novel? The “true” story of May and Misha may strike some readers as beautiful. Others may find it wildly improbable or even grotesque. Does their love strike you as a miracle, as an impossibility, or as something else?

12. *The Kitchen Boy* retells one of the most frequently told stories in twentieth-century history. Nevertheless, the novel succeeds in maintaining suspense. How does Robert Alexander accomplish this feat of storytelling?