

Paul Klebnikov, the editor of *Forbes Russia*, and the street outside his Moscow office where he was shot and killed last summer.

The Assassination of a Dream Like

many of the Russian-Americans he grew up among in Manhattan, the journalist Paul Klebnikov hoped to return to his ancestral land and help restore it to greatness. Unlike most of those people, he actually got there. But last summer, on a Moscow street, his life was tragically and mysteriously cut short.

BY OTTO POHL

T

HE WEEK BEFORE LAST, Paul Klebnikov was memorialized by his family and friends at the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. It was a subdued service, and many of the several hundred mourners stayed behind afterward to tell stories on an open microphone. An uncle played piano; a woman sang a song in Russian. Klebnikov had died in his prime, and he was remembered as a hero. By the time he was 41, he had realized part of a lifelong dream—he had left New York and gone to Russia as a reformer, an in-

vestigative reporter committed to using the power of the press to stop a new class of oligarchs from ransacking the country under the guise of capitalism.

That dream ended on a Friday night in July. It was 10 P.M., still light out, and Klebnikov was leaving his Moscow office, where he was the editor of the fledgling *Forbes Russia* magazine. There had been four issues so far, one of them about the 100 richest Russians, and the future looked promising.

He crossed the street and headed toward a footpath that led to the subway. A dark Lada with tinted windows—stolen, it later turned out—pulled out of a parking lot and drove toward Klebnikov. The driver rolled down his window. Shots were fired; four hit Klebnikov. As the car backed up and then drove off, Klebnikov tried to turn around, swayed, cried for help, and fell down. He got up again, staggered back in the direction of his office about twenty yards, and then fell again, on his back, on the rucksack he was still wearing. An eyewitness flagged down an ambulance. Everyone from *Forbes* had gone home, but a few staff members of the Russian edition of *Newsweek*, which shares offices with

PHOTOGRAPHS: FROM LEFT, OLGA NIKISHIN/GETTY IMAGES; MIKHAIL METZEL/AP

Friends remember the Klebnikovs' Upper East Side apartment as a time capsule, full of gilded icons and lively Russian Orthodox celebrations. "One person would be playing Tchaikovsky, drinking vodka, and in the next room people arguing vociferously about art. Everyone was eating blini."

Forbes, were still there. By the time *Newsweek* editor Alexander Gordeyev reached the scene, about fifteen minutes later, both police and the ambulance had arrived.

Gordeyev remembers Klebnikov looking very tired. "Do you know what happened?" he asked Klebnikov in English, thinking that it would be easier for Klebnikov to speak English at this point. "Nyet," Klebnikov answered in Russian, "somebody was shooting." "You don't know who?" "No." Gordeyev asked whether there had been any meetings, contacts, or visits that could have led to this. Again, Gordeyev claims, Klebnikov said no.

Klebnikov asked for oxygen, but the ambulance didn't have any. Another one was called and arrived within a few minutes. Klebnikov was placed on a stretcher and given an IV while the driver radioed to find out which hospital he should take him to. It took a quarter of an hour before he received a response. As they began driving, Klebnikov was already losing consciousness. At the hospital, the elevator taking Klebnikov to the operating room got stuck between floors. A nurse, still outside, began to push the elevator call button, then stopped. "There it is," she said. "That's his fate."

Mikhail Fishman, a *Newsweek* reporter who had gone to the hospital in the ambulance, began running around trying to find out how to get the lift operating again. He found a group of indifferent doctors and nurses sitting in a waiting room. He tried to pry apart the elevator doors with a chair leg. Ten minutes later, a workman appeared with tools and managed to open the lift. But Klebnikov could not be saved.

AMONG THE MANY distinctive subcultures of Manhattan, there is the small circle of White Russians, descendants of the czars, landed gentry, and intelligentsia who began to flee the advancing communists in 1917. Most of them scattered across Europe, but many came to New York. While they waited for their triumphant return to Mother Russia, they taught their native language to their children and told them theatrical stories of birch forests and gallant cossacks. Eventually, they got on with the business of rebuilding life in a foreign country. Generations passed.

Born in 1963, Paul grew up in a house that echoed with myths and traditions. In the garden of the family's weekend home in Sagaponac, he was christened in a galvanized washtub covered with a sheet and garlands of field flowers. A Russian priest, dressed in traditional vestments, threw Paul in the air and

immersed him into the water three times.

As a boy, Paul learned about his great-grandfather, an admiral in the Imperial Navy, and his great-great-great-grandfather, Ivan Pouschine, a friend of Alexander Pushkin's who was exiled to Siberia for his role in the Decembrist uprising against the czar in 1825. His father's side, the Klebnikovs, was a family of military officers. Paul's grandfather, Ross Nebolsine, had moved to New York and become a successful civil engineer and a leading figure in the Russian migr community, providing jobs and support to the aristocrats fleeing the Bolsheviks. Life in New York was good, but the community kept to its Old World customs, too. The social scene revolved around a series of elaborate balls.

In many ways, Paul was a typical Manhattan kid. He went to Saint Bernard's on 98th Street and spent vacations in Sagaponac. But he also eagerly learned the history of the czars. Friends and family remember the Klebnikovs' Upper East Side apartment as something of a time capsule, with its gilded icons and lively Russian Orthodox celebrations. "One person would be playing Tchaikovsky on the piano, drinking vodka, and in the next room there were people arguing vociferously about art, and everyone was eating blini," is how Ronald Bailey, a friend of Paul's from his first years at *Forbes*, remembers Easter. Even to an outsider like Bailey, the strong Klebnikov-family desire, even duty, to one day return and help Russia was clear. "The family heritage had a very strong belief that it was possible to help Russia," he said. "It was completely built into the belief system of the family. A lingering historical regret had come down through the generations that the grandfather had been chased out and that they would like to help the country repair itself."

Paul, like his sister and two brothers, was taught by their grandparents to carry themselves with aristocratic bearing. As a young man, Paul took to smoking a pipe and loved nothing better than commandeering dinner parties and forcing everyone to state opinions on the weighty issues of the moment.

Paul was also obsessed with testing himself. After graduating in 1984 with a B.A. in political science from Berkeley, he took the unusual step of spending a summer at the Marines' Officer Candidates School. He had no intention of a career in the military; he simply wished to subject himself to the physical and emotional demands of boot camp. Later, he ran the New York City marathon with two friends, all of them wearing T-shirts with the double-headed Russian eagle. One of the men, Serge Ossorguine, remembers Paul leading them through Russian military songs to keep them going ("We're fighting for Mother Russia and the czar!").

After Berkeley, Klebnikov pressed on with his studies, going to the London School of Economics, where he wrote his Russian-history dissertation on Pyotr Stolypin, a controversial figure who served as a minister under the last czar. Klebnikov worshipped Stolypin, often boring his friends with extended monologues about the minister's early efforts at privatization. "He was fasci-

Side apartment and lively Russian Orthodox celebrations. ing vodka, ople arguing vociferously

nated by Stolypin," recalls Tania Pouschine, a New York Russian-American formerly related to Klebnikov by marriage, "because Stolypin was one individual whose sheer competence might have changed Russian history if he had been allowed to live. He admired him on a personal level to a huge extent. To Paul, it was an example of the best Russia could produce."

That Stolypin also led a violent suppression of political dissent, executing so many Russians that the hangman's noose became known as a "Stolypin necktie," did not, apparently, dampen Klebnikov's enthusiasm.

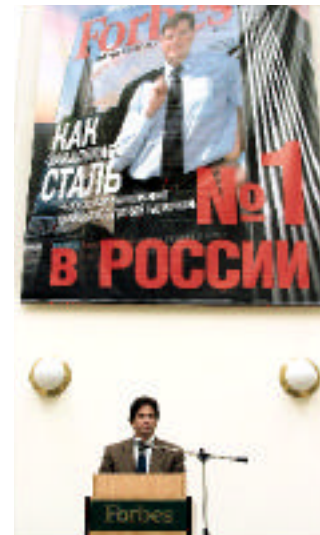
After finishing his dissertation, Klebnikov returned to New York and found work as a researcher at *Forbes*. By the early nineties, he was taking regular trips to Russia on assignment for the magazine. Klebnikov's optimism about Russia rarely wavered, but his reporting from those years chronicles his horror at what was unfolding there, the outright thievery and corruption that accompanied the transition to capitalism. "For the Russian people, the Yeltsin era was the biggest disaster," he later wrote, "since the Nazi invasion of 1941." Nonetheless, he was convinced he could help by exposing the insider deals and giveaways. "He had this messianic belief that he was going to be part of the transition of Russia from a gangster country to a civilized country," said William Baldwin, one of his editors.

In 1991, he married Musa Train, whom he had known since childhood (they have the same godfather). He married well, and certainly wealthy: Musa's father, John Train, was a major Wall Street banker. Musa and Paul moved into an apartment on the Upper West Side. At a housewarming party there, guests discussed the day's news—Boris Yeltsin had climbed onto a tank and defied the putsch against Gorbachev—and they all toasted the occasion with vodka shots.

Eventually, Paul and Musa had three children together. Paul could have led a very comfortable life in New York, but he was never content with just that. His reporting trips to Russia became more frequent. Finally, given the chance to be the founding editor of *Forbes Russia*, he moved there full-time at the end of 2003, leaving his wife and family in New York. Musa didn't want to move to Russia—"For her, going to Russia was like going to the moon to live," said the financier Boris Jordan, a family friend—so Klebnikov had agreed to serve as editor for only a year. In the meantime, he returned to New York for a week out of every month.

As Musa wrote in an article published in the *International Herald Tribune* after his death, "Throughout our marriage, Russia was the other woman."

IN SPITE OF THEIR LONG-CHERISHED DREAM, relatively few of the diaspora Russians ever moved back. Most of those who did went for financial gain, like Jordan, who left Wall Street in the early nineties to take advantage of what he saw as the investment bonanza of a lifetime. Jordan finagled his way into virtually every big attempt to reform the Russian economy. He



Klebnikov at the launch of *Forbes Russia* in early 2004.

helped conceive the privatization program together with Anatoly Chubais, the controversial loans-for shares program with Vladimir Potanin, and Putin's takeover of the independent television channel NTV.

These are precisely the sort of deals that might have attracted the interest of a crusading young

reporter, but Klebnikov always went easy on his friend Jordan, saving his vitriol for other self-styled Russian capitalists.

In the years leading up to his move to Moscow, Klebnikov took a particularly hard line on the car-dealer magnate Boris Berezovsky, culminating in a December 1996 *Forbes* cover article headlined "Godfather of the Kremlin?" (which he later turned into a book). Although the original article was published without a byline, the identity of the author was no secret. Among other things, the story suggested Berezovsky's complicity in murder and other strong-arm tactics. Klebnikov subsequently received death threats and decided to take a break from reporting about Russia. He and his family lived in Paris, where Klebnikov wrote several articles on other topics. Meanwhile, Berezovsky sued *Forbes*, and Klebnikov spent much of the coming years fighting the case, which was settled in 2003, with both sides claiming victory (the magazine had to back down from the murder implications). Klebnikov eventually resumed his work in Russia, but when he went there, he began traveling with a bodyguard.

Klebnikov's journalism wasn't always held in the highest regard by his peers. The *New York Times* published a positive review of *Godfather of the Kremlin*, but some Russian journalists said Klebnikov compromised himself by relying too heavily on ex-KGB sources. The case that Klebnikov assembled against Berezovsky is widely assumed to have been provided in large part by Aleksandr Korzhakov, the head of security for Boris Yeltsin; Korzhakov's first deputy, Valery Streletsky, published the Russian edition of Klebnikov's book. "When you use information given to you by the special services, you become their hostage," said Alexei Venediktov, a popular radio journalist. Investigative reporter Yevgenia Albats, who has also written about Berezovsky, considers Klebnikov's book little more than a "collection of gossip."

By 2000, Klebnikov's reporting for *Forbes* began to reflect his growing confidence that Putin's tough love—which included bullying people like Berezovsky—was just what Russia needed. Describing Putin's reign as a fresh "Act II" to Yeltsin's sloppy and corrupt "Act I" in an October 2001 *Forbes* article, Klebnikov outlined his renewed optimism for Russia. "Corruption, while still rife, is receding," he writes. "Though Russia remains a dangerous

PHOTOGRAPH BY MAXIM NOVIKOV/LANDOV

“We were trying to reassure his wife that people than to contract killers,” says a friend who had dinner with them just days before Paul was killed. Paul had stopped using a bodyguard. He thought it seemed “over-the-top.”

place for investors, some of its corporations have finally decided that it is in their best interest to respect the rights of minority shareholders.”

If Klebnikov was impressed by the corporate order that Putin managed to impose, he also understood that the plundering he had witnessed was by no means finished. Russia remained the biggest storehouse of raw materials in a world of ever-increasing demand, and with the price of oil soaring after 9/11, the government was flush, creating ever more opportunities for graft, corruption, and outright theft. It was an incredible boom time, and when the chance to edit *Forbes Russia* came along, Klebnikov saw it as his front-row seat.

FORBES RUSSIA IS OWNED by the German publishing company Axel Springer, which, eager to enter the Russian magazine market, negotiated the rights to the Russian editions of both *Forbes* and *Newsweek*. The market has been booming for years, and dozens of licensed foreign titles have begun to crowd the newsstand rack. Although there are already many Russian business magazines, there were no other licensed editions of international ones; Axel Springer hoped that Klebnikov would help *Forbes Russia* set a new standard for independent business journalism.

Despite his sometimes militant idealism, Klebnikov did not believe in austerity, either in his own life or in his magazine. He took pride in *Forbes*'s coverage of exotic travel and expensive French restaurants, believing these to be the just rewards of an honest business community. “You remind me of me in the early nineties,” Boris Jordan told Klebnikov at a dinner about two weeks before his death. “I came here with such a romantic view of Russia. I’m still an optimist, but more focused on the realities.” Jordan remembers Klebnikov answering, “I’m tired of all the negative stuff being written about Russia. I want to do more of the positive stuff.”

Klebnikov very much wanted his magazine to be a commercial success, and worked hard to publicize it. On April 22, a day once held holy for being Lenin’s birthday, Klebnikov invited more than 300 people to the luxurious Hotel Baltshug Kempinski, near the Kremlin, to drink champagne and celebrate the magazine’s launch. “The fact that the Russian market is ready for this kind of publication,” Klebnikov wrote in the magazine he was handing out at the party, “is one of the signs that Russian business is emerging to a new, more civilized stage of development.”

By all accounts, preparing for the magazine’s launch and

overseeing the magazine’s staff of twenty left Klebnikov little spare time. Although he shared an office with two editors in Moscow for months, neither of them really came to know Klebnikov personally, and they never saw him in social settings. “He had no other passions but his work,” said Kirill Vishnepolsky, a deputy editor. It is unclear whether Klebnikov was doing any investigative reporting. *Forbes Russia* publisher Leonid Bershidsky insists that Klebnikov was too busy editing the magazine to work as a reporter. But friends, including James Michaels, Klebnikov’s longtime editor in New York, doubt that Klebnikov was solely concentrating on being an editor. “I’m sure he was working on several things,” said Michaels. “It wouldn’t be Paul if he wasn’t.”

Present-day Moscow is a muckraker’s fantasyland. Potential conspiracies are everywhere. When the Manezh, a historic building located just outside the Kremlin walls, burned down in March, many suspected that it had been done intentionally, to clear the site for development. A few articles were published suggesting arson, and then the story vanished. Shortly after Leonid Reiman became the minister of Communications, cellular-phone companies competitive with MegaFon, which was partially owned by Reiman’s former company, suddenly began having problems with their licenses. While there has been no proof that either of these cases involved illegal activity, both have been mentioned as possible stories that Klebnikov was pursuing. Neither would seem to have put him in a life-threatening situation, but you can never be sure who’s behind what in Russia.

In one of its first issues, *Forbes Russia* had published a list of the richest Russians, which some observers speculate could have inspired a publicity-shy billionaire to seek revenge. But the Russian magazine *Finans* had published a very similar list just two months earlier, containing many of the same names; the *Forbes* list contained little new information. And experienced Russia observers contend that contract killings are usually more pragmatic than that, anyway. “Russian businessmen don’t kill for vengeance,” Venediktov said. “They kill to stop information.”

According to one source, Klebnikov received a file in early July that contained extremely sensitive information. He called several people for advice, describing it as “the worst thing” he had ever seen—quite a statement from someone who had spent years exploring the darkest recesses of Russian crime. What was contained in that file, or what happened to it, is unclear. The fact that he received it just days before his murder makes a link seem plausible. And yet, if this is true, why, then, did he not retain a bodyguard, as he had done in the past, and why did he not mention the file to Fishman, the *Newsweek* reporter, after he’d been shot? The Klebnikov family said they have no knowledge of any such file.

To some of Klebnikov’s acquaintances in Moscow, there were signs that he wasn’t entirely comfortable. On June 20, freelance journalist Alyona Dushka visited him at home to discuss turning his doctoral thesis on Stolypin into a book. They sat in the kitchen of his home, a large, modestly renovated apartment in a Stalin-era tower overlooking the Moskva River. While she sipped tea and

now resort to courts rather than to contract killers,” says a friend who had dinner with them just days before Paul was killed. Paul had stopped using a bodyguard.



Paul’s funeral in Manhattan in July.

Klebnikov smoked his pipe, they discussed the success of *Forbes*. With his magazine turning out so well, she asked, shouldn’t he move his family to Russia? “I don’t know if it is safe for my family,” he told her. There was a pause, and then she changed the subject. “I was afraid of asking what he meant,” she remembers.

The next day, Klebnikov spoke to a crowd of 150 at a charity fund-raiser at the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. He made a speech about the necessity of restoring old village churches to help rebuild the social life in Russia’s countryside. Elisabeth Apraxine, a White Russian descendant from Belgium, remembers him as cheerful, articulate, and anything but nervous.

At the Pushkin Caf, housed in a new building reconstructed to look like it had in czarist times, *SundayTimes* of London correspondent Mark Franchetti met Paul and Musa, who was in town visiting, for dinner on July 5, four days before Paul’s murder. Franchetti spent much of the dinner arguing with Paul’s upbeat assessment of Russia. “The only thing we had 100 percent agreement on,” Franchetti said, was trying to convince Musa that Russia had become a safe place. “We were trying to reassure his wife that people now resort to courts rather than to contract killers.” Paul had stopped using a bodyguard, because, as Musa later told Franchetti, he thought it seemed “over-the-top.”

During their final days together, Musa and Paul walked through the narrow streets of historic Moscow, discussing ways they could help save Moscow’s architectural heritage from developers. After dropping Musa off at the airport on Wednesday, Paul began work on the next issue of *Forbes*, which was to feature the 50 most highly paid Russian sports stars.

Two days later, he was dead.

INTERIOR MINISTRY INVESTIGATORS arrived at the *Forbes* office first. They performed a quick search through Klebnikov’s computer and then removed it, along with all of his files and interview tapes. His apartment was also searched. The day after the murder, police reported that they found the Lada, abandoned in a courtyard a few kilometers from the scene of the murder.

Then the investigation lapsed into months of silence. Klebnikov’s family, with the help of friends in the Russian-American community, has been trying to keep the pressure on the Russian government, but to little avail. There is no shortage of senseless violence in Russia. The war in Chechnya, together with terrorist attacks like the one in Beslan, easily push the death of one enterprising American reporter off the news pages. His death is also far from unique. About 40 journalists have been killed since

the Soviet Union collapsed, including about a dozen since Putin came to power.

Still, Russian news wires came alive September 28 with dramatic news. PAUL KLEBNIKOV’S MURDER SOLVED, the Interfax headline shouted. Two Chechens had been arrested in the course of a kidnapping investigation, the article reported, and Moscow police chief Vladimir Pronin claimed a pistol found in their possession had likely been the Klebnikov murder weapon. The brief announcement left a trail of unanswered questions—what kidnapping? Why Chechens?—but Police Chief Pronin projected an air of total certainty. Those following the case, like *Forbes Russia* publisher Bershidsky, expressed cautious hope that investigators were onto a hot lead.

Only hours later, the story began to unravel. The office of the Russian General Prosecutor issued a blanket condemnation of Pronin for speaking out of line. Journalists investigating the kidnapping angle found that the kidnap victim, a businessman, had apparently been held not by the Chechens but by officers of the FSB, the successor to the KGB. Instead of facts about Klebnikov, the following days spilled the ugly guts of a Moscow real-estate deal gone bad. The Chechens may have been just friends trying to negotiate the businessman’s release. And the connection between the Chechens and Klebnikov? Ballistic tests proved that none of the weapons found were used in the Klebnikov murder, the newspaper *Gazeta* reported.

While the General Prosecutor’s office, which maintains official control of the investigation, relapsed into silence, Pronin knew he had some explaining to do. So that’s what he did: On Friday, October 1, his spokesman issued a statement denying that Pronin had ever said anything about Klebnikov in the first place.

That left observers guessing at the true state of the investigation. “I don’t think there is any progress, which is why they’re saying such stupid things,” said Oleg Panfilov, the president of the the Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, a Russian advocacy group. “They either have no idea, which seems likely, or they may know everything and are trying to distract people from their central theory.”

I visited the *Forbes Russia* offices a few weeks after Klebnikov’s murder to speak with Maxim Kashulinsky, the managing editor. Klebnikov’s desk had already been cleared off, and the only sign of the former editor was a small memorial on a side table by the office entrance, which consisted of a framed portrait of Klebnikov, a bouquet of wilting carnations, and a candle in a glass jar. At the end of our conversation, I asked him whether Klebnikov’s murder meant anything for Russia. He shook his head, and then, as if embarrassed that a simple gesture could sum up Klebnikov’s legacy, he addressed the frustrating opacity of Russian public life. “The murder will mean a lot for Russia,” he said, “if they solve it.” He emphasized the *if*.

That is a painful epitaph for a Russia optimist. “If Paul were alive today,” said Serge Ossorguine, “he would be very disheartened by his murder.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHIP EASTY/LANDOV