

## YERBULAT: BORN UNDER THE SIGN OF THE SUN!

*“Human life is not so primitive, as to divide it only between dark and light sides. Millions of shadows and transitional shades lie between light and dark. And it is reasonable that a person learns to distinguish between them all his life.”*

Haruki Murakami

**“Vision is not what your eyes see,  
it is the image that your brain creates.”**

I could not pass up the offer to write about Yerbulat. He meant too much in my life. The years of my youth, family life, and the beginning of my career were associated with him, and therefore, he occupied a significant place in my life as a person, as the father of my daughter, and as a spouse during a certain period of my life, which lasted 14 years.

The first wedding which I not only attended, but also helped to organize was that of my older brother, Mark Magau, which took place in the Kalamger Café in the Writers' Union of Kazakhstan building. And therefore, this wedding was a most fun and meaningful event for me. In addition, on that day of the wedding on March 5, 1976, I first met Yerbulat. He gave the impression as being an outstanding, educated Almaty intellectual with the manners of a gentleman, which are rare to this day.

I, like many others, have always had a sense of respect for people who stand out from the crowd for their talents, intelligence, and knowledge. When we met, Yerbulat seemed to me to be one of these young people. I then learned from third parties that during his student years, he was the chairman of the student scientific association at KazSU. For some reason, it struck my imagination! In that same year, he went to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) for an internship at the Leningrad branch of the Institute of Archeology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, under the leadership of V.M. Masson. And then, he impressed me again, but this time with his letters, which he wrote to me from Leningrad. He had beautiful handwriting and could write a letter in such a romantic style that it looked like a small piece of literature. I remember constantly waiting for another letter from him, and when I found it in my mailbox, it caused me a storm of joy!

**“Still, a family is a very long relationship”**

When I entered Yerbulat's family, his father, Akzhan Smagulov, was a retired KGB colonel. Apparently, he was a professional and a “real partisan,” since I don't recall him ever talking or even mentioning his work. At the same time, he was a very sociable person, a great optimist by nature, he never complained, never criticized anyone, and whatever he did, he did with a smile and with a cheerful mood. Akzhan-ata was a man of light souls; that is how he was called, Akzhan, which means “light soul” [in Kazakh]. He also, as they say, did not yearn for his granddaughters. He had four of them: Gulnara and Zina, daughters of Yerbulat's elder sister Maria; Almira, our daughter; and Dania, the daughter of Naili, his younger sister. Atashka<sup>4</sup> was always ready to go for a walk or play with his granddaughters, and it was obvious that he really enjoyed it. Our daughter got sick easily when she was a child and, on the advice of doctors and with my father's help, we managed for three years in a row to send her for a month's treatment to the “Kazakhstan” children sanatorium which is in Kislovodsk. Our Akzhan-ata would get a voucher to a sanatorium located nearby and follow his granddaughter to Kislovodsk, so she would not feel lonely there. Such a resourceful, kind-hearted, and caring man was Atashka.

I remember a funny incident during our work with Yerbulat under the program of the “Kazakh-American Archaeological Expedition.” Archaeologist Jeannine Davis-Kimball from America, together with her husband Matt, organized, along with our archaeologists Serzhan Akhinzhanov and Yerbulat Smagulov, a Kazakh-American archaeological expedition to conduct excavations at the ancient

<sup>4</sup> *Atashka* is a diminutive term of endearment which is a hybrid Kazakh/Russian word meaning “granddad.”

city of Otrar in 1990 and also to conduct excavations near Talgar in 1991. In the summer, Jeannine Kimball brought 9-10 Americans who were not archaeologists, but simply came to participate in the excavations as amateurs. I worked as a translator on these expeditions. Once we invited her and her husband Matt to visit for lunch. When I introduced our Ata and just pronounced his title [as KGB colonel], our American guest Matt suddenly jumped up from his chair and saluted his enemy. All those present at the table were on edge and did not know how to react – whether to laugh or be surprised. Only Akzhan-ata smiled and made a remark to him that “one doesn’t put a hand to an uncovered head [i.e., salute out of uniform].” At that moment everyone relaxed and laughed. Matt was the same age as Atashka, and even though we knew the professions of all the other American members of the expedition, at the time, Matt never told us what he was doing before retirement. I think that the phrase “retired KGB colonel” caused an instinctive reaction from Matt, either as a military man or a man with a good sense of humor.

Yerbulat loved and knew how to create a comfortable home. He could make pieces of furniture with his own hands, such as a bedside table for a hallway, bookshelves, or a table. Working in Shaulder in the Turkestan region, he learned from local residents how to cook real rice pilaf. It seems to me that I have never tasted such delicious pilaf since. I remember how, a few years after we separated, I caught myself thinking that I missed his pilaf. Once again, I am convinced of the accuracy of the statement “If a person is talented, then he is talented in everything.” If he hadn’t become an archaeologist, Yerbolat could have become a successful writer or a cook-whatever he did, he could have been successful.

Yerbulat was a very interesting conversationalist and distinguished by his unique humor. He had his own unshakable opinion on absolutely everything in life. He gave a detailed answer to any question, while creating the impression that he had prepared in advance and worked out the question. If he made comments, they were often fair, and it was amusing to listen to his extraordinary criticism. So, for example, when I was returning home from work in the evening, he met me with the phrase: “A woman came with a reticule!” I actually very rarely had to buy groceries for the home since we had two real men living in our house, Yerbulat and his father, both of whom were extremely thrifty and responsible. We were often visited by Yerbulat’s older sister Maria, a kind, hard-working, and caring person who lived and still lives in the village of Shilik, near Almaty. Every time she visited, she always brought delicious fruits and vegetables that she grew on her own land. The closest thing to Yerbulat during his entire life was Maria’s family,

about whom he never stopped worrying and caring.

And I also can’t help but mention Yerbulat’s mother. Coincidentally, after the birth of his younger sister Niley, she became seriously ill and at the time of our wedding had been ill for about 20 years. The wedding took place on July 14, 1979, three years after we met and two days before Yerbulat’s birthday. After returning from Leningrad in the summer of 1978, he invited me home to introduce me to his parents. I remember how Yerbulat took me to the kitchen, where his mother was waiting for me, and left us alone. I wore a red chintz dress with a geometric print, I had red semicircular clips in my ears and I wore bright red lipstick to match my dress. Apparently, I really wanted her to like me. At the sight of his mother, I regretted so much that I had dressed up in all red. On that day, and later, when I got to know her better, Yerbulat’s mother left me with the impression of a person of poise, tremendous willpower— a beautiful, intelligent, and wise woman who loved her son more than anything else in the world. It was Yerbulat’s mother who taught me how to cook, and by the way she taught me, I can judge how delicious her cooking was! The day after my visit, Yerbulat told me that his mother approved of his choice for the first time, which I was infinitely happy about.

During the summers, Yerbulat used to take our daughter Almira and me to Shaulder. It was a village near the ancient settlement of Otrar, where there was an archaeological base with houses, a canteen, and a warehouse for storing finds. Although there were no basic conditions for a comfortable stay, I liked to go there much more than on foreign trips, where we were placed in five-star hotels. I associate Shaulder with such words as “summer,” “heat,” “hot,” and “early mornings,” because at about 5 a.m. Yerbulat would leave by bus with his colleagues for the excavations. Another word was “tasty borsch” for lunch in the canteen and “starry, night sky,” which hung over us as we were lying on a trestle bed in the base camp yard; and “warmth,” which emanated from Yerbulat as he tried to provide more comfort for Almirka and me in these harsh field conditions. In fact, this “warmth” could always be felt when he was around, regardless of whether he was busy writing an article at home at his desk and concentrating on it, or when he directly devoted his free time to his family and spent it with us. According to the Jyotish [Vedic] horoscope, Yerbulat was born under the strong influence of the Sun, and therefore he simply radiated this energy of warmth. I daresay that everyone who had ever communicated with him or was near him for even a short time could feel this warmth, and especially, it seems to me, it was felt strongly in the last years of his life.

In relation to his daughter Almira, Yerbulat was and always had been a kind, loving, and caring father.

Often on weekends, we would all go sledding in the mountains together, go for a walk at the Medeo skating rink, visit the park, or go to the movies or the zoo. During vacations, which rarely coincided with our available time, he was the one to initiate our trips. So Yerbulat, Almirka, and I would go to Moscow, Leningrad, Riga, Sochi, or visit our relatives in Pavlodar. When I got married, I worked as a translator in the Alma-Ata branch of the All-Union Agency “Intourist.” And due to the nature of my work, I often had to accompany our Soviet tourists abroad or be with foreign tourists on tours to cities in the Soviet Union. I never, not for a moment, had any doubt in my mind as to whether I could or could not leave my daughter in the care of her father. When I think about it now, I realize that I trusted him as much as I trusted myself. He was a very reliable, caring father. At the beginning of 1983, when my daughter was only 2 years old, I was ordered to take a three-month advanced training course in Moscow, it was impossible to refuse, and dismissal was offered as an alternative. I went to the courses, and Yerbulat together with Atashka did an excellent job. Moreover, Yerbulat, to my great surprise and joy, without any warning (there was no cell phone service then!) somehow came to see me in Moscow for a few days just to visit me so we could take a walk together in Moscow. Of course, this could have been thanks to Akzhan-ata, who was looking after our 2-year-old daughter with Nailya in those days.

Yerbulat was his father’s son and became like his father, a loving and caring atashka. I realized this sometime later when our grandson was a little over a year old. When he had just been born in May 2012, probably because we had not lived together for a long time by then, Yerbulat took the news rather coldly. Shoria’s father is an Indian from Calcutta. At my news on the phone about the birth of his grandson, Yerbulat asked: “Well, do you want to tell me that Rabindranath Tagore was born?”<sup>2</sup> Later, however, his love for his grandson became an unforgettable and integral part of his life. Yerbulat was in the habit of inventing nicknames for his children. Thus, he often called Shoria “Mowgli.”<sup>3</sup> Every time Yerbulat visited following his return from an expedition and spoke to Shoria on the phone, he would ask, “Mowgli, did you miss me?” I now think that, like many in this world, he lacked love. Yerbulat himself was a generous, benevolent man; able to show love, care, and attention to those around him, but whether he received all this in return remains a big question for me. True, Shoria

also loved and loved his atashka very much, and for a long time after Atashka left, we—Shoria, his mother Almirka, and I—remembered him almost every day. It’s very hard for all of us to accept the idea that we’ll never see him again, but life goes on and we must move on. Shoria’s biggest regret is that Atashka never had time to take him to Turkestan to show him his excavations.

**“Will you really never forget me?”  
“Never. I have no reason to forget you.”**

If someone were to ask me now, “If you could live your life over, would you like to meet Yerbulat again?” I would definitely answer, “Yes!” There are no one hundred percent “good” or “bad” people in this life. Each of us combines both, and it all depends on our understanding of what is “good” and what is “bad.” It’s all very individual. I think that a big drawback of our society is that at no stage of education – neither at our school, nor at the university – do they teach us the most essential things in life: The human values of being happy, how to build relationships in a family, relationships between a man and a woman, how to aspire to personal growth, and knowing ourselves to some extent. We have no one teaching us some basic psychological issues. As a result, problems grow like a snowball going downhill in everyday life. But, despite all the difficulties we faced and overcame along our own way, Yerbulat remains in my memory as a bright, benevolent, and unique person who continued to support Almirka and me until the end of his life. Yes, I had some hard feelings, we were young and foolish, and we ended up hurting each other a great deal. But for the most part, Yerbulat and I had a benevolent relationship, both during our time together and after. After five years of separation, I was able to “let go” of the offenses, realizing and accepting my own mistakes that I had made. And since then, I have had great respect for him as a person and as a consummate professional. The only thing that bothered me since that time was the state of his health, when at times he felt unwell.

**“Some are good at what they do.  
And some are really good at what they do.  
There’s a huge difference between  
these two skills.”**

Yerbulat Akizhanovich Smagulov devoted 45 years of his life to archeology and made an invaluable contribution to its development in Kazakhstan. He was marked by high professionalism, devotion, literacy, a huge capacity for work, scrupulousness in the performance of archaeological research, and writing of scientific publications. I, as a full-time and later freelance employee, worked from time to time with

<sup>2</sup> **Ed. note:** Rabindranath Tagore was an Indian polymath, poet, writer, and philosopher of the 19th-20th century.

<sup>3</sup> Mowgli was the main character in the English journalist and writer, Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* (1894).

Yerbulat at the Institute of Archaeology at the Academy of Sciences of Kazakhstan from 1989 to 2012. I can say that archaeology was his true calling, and archaeological expeditions were places of rest and peace where he reached a state of complete satisfaction and self-realization as a talented scholar of archaeology. Yerbulat found his own niche in archaeology and was faithful to it for a long, yet fleeting period of time; from the student's desk, until the last moment of his life.

**P.S.:** It seems to me that if everyone found and occupied his niche in the sphere of his activity, as well as his place in society, and did not infringe on the space of others, this world would be a much better place and many more people would live happier lives.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank from the bottom of my heart, albeit belatedly, the Samarkand archaeologists for their hospitality and support they provided to Yerbulat in November 1990 during the defense of his doctoral dissertation. At that time, as far as I remember, the defense in Samarkand was attended by the legendary scientist and archaeologist Professor Vadim Mikhailovich Masson from Leningrad and the official opponent, Doctor of History, Yuri Fedorovich Buryakov, to whom Yerbulat did not fail to introduce me following his defense.

I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Yerbulat's friend, an archeologist from Samarkand, who met and hosted us at his home. I remember he was always smiling and had a kind and very hospitable family. To my great shame, I have forgotten his name and now I have no one to ask. If you are reading these lines, thank you very much and I bow to you and your family!

For me, those days in Samarkand were unforgettable and some of the happiest and most joyful days of our lives together!

I wish everyone happiness and peace in your home!

**Zaure Smagulova**

#### **MY FAVORITE ATASHKA**

Atashka was the best person. As an atashka, he was a super-atashka. He was as warm as the sun, he loved everyone— my dad, my mom, my apachik,<sup>4</sup> and me. Atashka always granted my wishes. Atashka was kind, he always helped everyone. He was a jack of all trades. Once Atashka told me: “Your atashka's a goldsmith.” Then he fixed my toy.

One day he came, and no one was expecting Atashka that day, and my mother wasn't home. It was just me and Atashka, and I was so surprised that Atashka brought a huge box! And the box was full of tangerines, and in the middle, there was a big machine – a crane. I had wanted one for a long time, and bang! – my wish came true! Atashka always came so unexpectedly. Atashka was the best for me. When I went to sleep on top of Atashka and woke up in the morning, Atashka was already working. He loved his archeology very, very much. No one else was as good, only Atashka. It was a pity that Atashka always only came to us for a short time. I'll never forget the time we went for walks at the zoo. Atashka took me to the zoo, to the entertainment centers, and to walk around the city. It was so cool being with Atashka!

By **Shoria Vir Singh**,  
grandson, 9 years old

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<sup>4</sup> Apachik is a diminutive term of endearment which is a hybrid Kazakh/Russian word meaning “granny.”