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Embassy Moscow: a Time of Crisis

In September of 1962, I was assigned to my first regular Foreign Service post at the Moscow Embassy, replacing Adolph “Spike” Dubs as head of the Foreign Political Section. (Spike, a wonderful human being, was later assassinated when he was ambassador in Kabul). It was a fascinating though difficult time to be in Moscow. Though the Cuban Missile Crisis threatened the survival of our two countries, we were probably less tense than Americans back home because we were sheltered from the alarmist reporting of the American press. And my past work had convinced me that the Soviets would be the first to blink.

Ambassador Foy Kohler limited knowledge of the crucial exchanges of messages between Kennedy and Khrushchev to his deputy, his political counselor, and some translators. Being excluded from this close inner circle was probably a good lesson for a somewhat cocky, relatively junior first-tour officer.

The next crisis was the assassination of President Kennedy. We were having dinner at the French commercial counselor’s when an Agence France Presse correspondent was called out to take a message. Shocked by the news and queasy from trying to smoke a large Cuban cigar with sophistication, I rushed to the Embassy. Not only did Khrushchev himself come to sign the condolence book at the Embassy, but Russians on the street would stop us and say, “How could you have allowed this to happen?” For to many

Russians, Kennedy was the symbol of the young leader they would like to have had, and they assumed he was destroyed by “reactionary circles opposed to peace.”

I opened my tour with a crisis of a different dimension. Accompanying Bill Morgan, our book procurement officer, on a trip to Baku, Yerevan, and Tbilisi to buy books under our bilateral agreement with the Russians, we found the atmosphere increasingly tense. In Baku, which had its first snowfall in twenty-five years, our “tail” slipped and fell on his face while following us up the long staircase above the city. On the flight to Yerevan, the stewardess apologetically hung coats all around us so that we could not see out. We were, however, allowed to travel from Yerevan to Tbilisi by a train that passed for miles along the plowed stripes and watchtowers along the Armenian-Turkish border. The director of the Folk Theater in Tbilisi, whom we met on the train, failed to meet us as he had promised. We understood why when we read one of the wall newspapers on the hill above Tbilisi. It showed pictures of U.S. embassy officers expelled as CIA spies for running Colonel Oleg Penkovsky, the highly placed Soviet officer who had explained to us how the Soviet missile program was much weaker than we believed. It was this information that had made it easier for us to call Khrushchev’s bluff during the missile crisis.

The Khrushchev Era

Back in 1952, while in the Intelligence Bureau, I was scheduled to be assigned to Moscow, but the money ran out. Sovietologists who had served in the Soviet Union when Uncle Joe was still alive considered themselves *la crème de la crème*. Working in Moscow when Khrushchev was secretary general was the second best thing, for it was a period of relative détente, and Khrushchev was such an ebullient, sociable, intellectually curious and unpredictable personality, with a gift for pithy, unbureaucratic language. His much-quoted “We shall bury you” reflected his confidence that the Soviet Union would defeat the United States in the competition between two rival visions of society.

With his impulsiveness and lack of good judgment, Khrushchev was his own worst enemy. In trying to emulate the success of American agriculture, he decreed that corn should be planted across the country, regardless of the suitability of the region, earning him the nickname of *Kukuruznik*, the Corn Man. His campaign to convert the virgin lands of Kazakhstan to wheat production was a disappointment. His efforts to restructure the party bureaucracy and to force Soviet peasants off the land into urban *Agrogorods* alienated the party bureaucracy.

But his most serious mistakes were in foreign policy. His “liberal” policies were blamed for the uprising in Hungary in 1956 and the deterioration in relations with Communist China. His most grievous mistake was his gamble that he could strengthen his bargaining position on issues like Berlin and deter an American attack on Cuba by emplacing nuclear weapons on Cuba. The result must have infuriated the conservative military, humiliated by being forced to back down. When I left Moscow in August 1964, Khrushchev had had a good harvest, in contrast to recent times, and analysts thought that this had strengthened his position. But in October a coterie of party officials led by the future general secretary, Leonid Brezhnev, and KGB Chairman Vladimir Semichastniy took advantage of his absence to depose him and return “order” to Soviet society.

Russian Humor

A lot of humor went out of Russian life with the departure of Khrushchev. A feature of that period of thaw was the assortment of jokes that came to be known as Radio Yerevan. For April 1 the embassy used to put out its compilation of the best Soviet jokes, most of which, unfortunately, I cannot remember. One of the jokes concerned that well-known Armenian proclivity for political survival. Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan was the prototype of a surviving Armenian. In one of these jokes, the tsar is back on the throne of Russia and Khrushchev is an old man living in exile. Khrushchev calls up the tsar and pleads to be allowed to return and to die in his *rodina* (motherland) like any good Russian. The tsar hesitates and then says, "Wait a minute, I must consult Count Mikoyan."

On the morbid side was one of the jokes at the height of atomic warfare fears: "What do you do when the air raid sounds? Answer: Find a white sheet and walk, not run, to the nearest cemetery."

Sometimes the humor was unintended. On my first taxi ride in Moscow in 1962 I asked the driver about life today and under Stalin. "Oh it was much better under Stalin," he said. "Vodka cost only two kopecks a bottle."

Happily the Russians have not lost their gift for sardonic humor. On my last trip in 2010, our guide said that Russians see a virtue in crossing the road against a red light; "It gets rid of old fogies." The Russian economy, she said, is referred to not as the "free market but the flea market." With their usual optimism, when asked, "How are things?" they answer, "Better than they will be tomorrow." A pessimist, she said, was an "informed optimist."

In one of the many jokes comparing national character, the Russian is said to be "the person who is naked but has one apple and thinks he's in Paradise." In Yaroslavl, our guide kept pointing out unfinished local projects that, he said with a smile, will "of course be ready for the millennium celebration in September. The city government has said so."

An "Asia Expert"

The embassy did not have area experts in 1962 as we did later, so I took what seemed the most interesting region, Asia, as my sphere of responsibility. Much of my work was initially focused on Laos, where efforts to set up a neutral, independent coalition government under Prince Souvanna Phouma had broken down, with Souvanna Phouma siding with the Communist Pathet Lao against the Royal Lao government supported by the United States, Thailand, and the CIA-trained Hmong mountain tribes. In our NATO counselor meetings in Moscow, I would discuss the Soviet position on Laos, based again on patterns of Soviet behavior and analysis of the press. At one point Ambassador Kohler said, "I hope to Hell you know what you are talking about." Happily events proved me right. When Governor Harriman came to Moscow to try to persuade the Soviets to withdraw their support of the Pathet Lao and Chinese, I was amused, as the note taker, to see the governor ostentatiously remove his hearing aid after determining that Foreign Minister Gromyko had nothing new to say. At the luncheon he gave Harriman in the Foreign Ministry guesthouse, Gromyko was highly amused when one of Harriman's aides told him that the governor's nickname was the Crocodile. The Crocodile was not amused.

As the self-appointed Asia expert, I enjoyed the company of the sophisticated Laotian ambassador Kamphan Panya, who was later forced to flee Laos. The details given by the Burmese chargé about the sex life of *Homo Sovieticus*, as seen, he claimed, through the eyes of

Burmese students, became the basis of a dispatch that was never approved for transmittal to Washington.

It was also the Burmese chargé who invited us to dinner at the appropriately named Winter Garden at the Prague Restaurant, which had no heating when the temperature outside was in the low teens. The poor Asian ladies shivered in their beautiful Saris. The wife of the British minister held a bowl of hot soup to her bosom, and the Soviets resolved the problem *à la Russe* by drinking more vodka.

Life in Moscow

Living at No. 45 Leninsky Prospekt among Russians and not in the Embassy Ghetto gave us a better feel for Moscow. Walking our first night in the huge adjacent Gorky Park, we had a charming introduction to Moscow from a scruffy-looking Russian who ran over, bowed deeply, and congratulated us on the coiffure of our little black poodle Girouette, which had been recently coiffed by her former owner, the Princesse de Nouilles, in Paris.

In wintertime the paths in Gorky Park were turned into a great ice-skating rink, with lights and music. In the summer, our visiting daughter and a French friend were snuck into the restaurants in the park by their Russian boyfriends. Closer to the Kremlin, what was perhaps the world's largest circular swimming pool had been built on the site where in the 1930s Stalin had blown up the largest cathedral in Moscow, the Church of the Redeemer. As one of the Russian-speaking fathers, I found myself one day with the two small boys of the deputy chief of mission, one under each arm, as they received a swimming lesson. With the temperature outside in the low teens, the water from the heated pool congealed on our upper bodies, turning us into snowmen. (In 2006, Nan and I attended a service in the now-restored cathedral, with the church hierarchy resplendent in their rich robes.)

In summer, we would spend weekends at the embassy *dacha*, or country house, in Tarasovka, about ninety minutes outside of Moscow. Or we would go to the beach in a large reservoir near Moscow to watch the crowds of young people swimming, boating, listening to the songs of the dissident artist Vysotsky, or taunting the local guardians of law and order by dancing the forbidden Twist in the sand.

We were spoiled by the opportunity to hear the Borodin Quartet and operas like *Boris Godunov* and *Eugene Onegin* and to see the great ballet dancers of the day perform to knowledgeable and loving audiences for a ridiculously low price. The tour of the Robert Shaw Chorale singing the Bach B Minor Mass, Monteverdi Baroque music, and American spirituals was a "happening." Only music majors had ever been allowed to hear the Mass, and one painter was so moved that he painted a picture of Christ and gave it to Shaw at the next day's performance. While the female voices in those days tended to be strong but shrill (in contrast to the wonderful singers who have emerged in the new Russia), Shaw was impressed by the male basses. He declined, however, the invitation to become a director of the historic Kapella choir in Leningrad.

Touring European Russia

From Moscow, we would travel as much as travel controls allowed to the different historic sites: the centers of Russian princely power before Moscow, in Vladimir, Suzdal, and Rostov Velikhi.

Our most memorable trip was to Yaroslavl over a weekend with three friends. After leaving the historic site of the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate in Zagorsk, the limitless white landscape suddenly dropped off without any warning, and I found myself heading down a steep, icy hill with a huge hole in the middle. To avoid breaking my axle, I braked and skidded around. Then my Checker station wagon slid slowly off the road upside down, fortunately into a snow bank far below. The top of the Checker was flattened but only one lady passenger suffered some broken ribs.

Eventually our faithful KGB came to see why we had not arrived at our next checkpoint. A polite "private citizen" promptly stopped a mail truck so that we could load our baggage and passengers for a return to Moscow, while I stood on the road, shivering from shock and from the minus 26 degree temperature, while the police pondered for an hour how the accident happened and how to get out my car. Finally I was taken to the police station at Pereslavl-Zalessky nearby, famous for having the pond on which Peter the Great sailed his first boat.

Hearing that there was an American in town, the mayor hurried over to discuss in depth his favorite writer, Mark Twain. Boy, was he disappointed! All I could faintly remember was Huckleberry Finn. I froze in the back of another car of "friends" returning me to Moscow. I sent for my old Ford station wagon, which had not yet been sold in the States, and sold what was basically a solid Checker motor and chassis to a collective farm, which is probably still driving the monster.

My next trip was memorable for a different reason. I was traveling alone by train to Budapest to join the family on vacation, convinced that the Soviets would try somehow to compromise me. In fact, in Kiev I watched as a gorgeous blond walked down the platform and headed for my compartment. She claimed that she was traveling to join her military husband in Budapest. I waited for her to make some approach, but she was very proper, asking me to leave as she prepared for bed. I concluded that the lady was probably legitimate, but had been asked to report back on my reaction to the situation.

The Soviets were not enthusiastic about our efforts to measure conditions in the hinterland against those in Moscow and Leningrad. For protection against provocation, American officers had to be accompanied by at least one fellow officer, family member, or diplomat from another NATO mission. Even so, we had incidents, usually involving the military. We were briefed on what to look for on our travels, such as the cost of food in the markets, or the license plates of military vehicles to help our military identify Soviet military units, which seems so silly today.

Touring Central Asia

Our most exciting trips were certainly those to the capitals or historic sites of Central Asia. We were among the first diplomats to be allowed to visit Khiva in Uzbekistan. This walled city, with its adobe buildings, was what I imagined a city in biblical times would have looked like. Standing on the walls, we could look down into the garden of a two-story house marked by a beautifully carved wooden pillar joining the patio to the first floor. Even though there was no hot water, and the facilities were out of doors, we always cited our hotel in Khiva to surly Russian hotelkeepers as a model of hospitality.

In Tashkent, we experienced the nationalist pride of a people with an ancient history. At the beautiful National Museum, the curator, looking for emphasis at our accompanying Russian guide, pointed out how old the Uzbek civilization was. Older, he implied, than Mother Russia.

In Samarkand, the oldest city in Central Asia dating back to the third century B.C., we saw workmen trying to replicate the extraordinary blue of the tiles on the great mosques. The Uzbeks pointed with pride to the celestial observatory of their early astronomer, Ulan Beg. In Bukhara, we admired the superb brickwork and chased down a famous former mosque, which seemed to have vanished until a small boy showed us the ruins. We also visited a synagogue of Sephardic Jews who had not yet emigrated.

We timed our visit to Frunze, now Bishkek, capital of Kirghizstan, for our son's Easter vacation, but it was ill timed. Apparently some Communist conference was in progress, and security was very tight. When I visited the bookstores I found them all closed for "inventory." We were delighted to be invited by the Imam, the Muslim religious leader of Kirghizia, for some "real food," meaning not Russian. But when we arrived for dinner after a day of harassment, we found four "goons" waiting in a car outside the mosque. The Imam was clearly relieved when I suggested that we postpone our dinner, and he gave us the name of the best restaurant in town, which had a great band. While we were eating, accompanied by our son's red-haired teacher from Moscow, a drunken Kirghiz officer staggered past our table and hit one of the forty Iraqi Air Force trainees seated behind us. To a man, these bourgeois-dressed Iraqis exploded from their seats with knives in their hands, and it was a miracle that the Kirghiz got out alive. With all of his charges chasing the Kirghiz, the Soviet group leader turned his attention to our ebullient redhead. We told him that we were going to the Easter service in the local cathedral, and he offered to join us, claiming that he was a former Interior Ministry (NKVD) police officer who was studying to become a surgeon in Frunze.

We arrived at the church in the pouring rain in mud a foot deep. With nothing to do on a Saturday night, all the young hooligans in Frunze were trying to push their way into the church. Sturdy Russian *babushky* were pushing them back down the long flight of stairs, and our dubious new acquaintance and I came to their support. Suddenly the Russian pulled our redhead with him into the church, where she had the impression he was truly interested in the service. Left alone, all the women turned on me, assuming that I was a police officer, saying, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself allowing this hooliganism?" When I explained who we were, they crowded around, shielding us with their umbrellas, asking if it was true that in America we broadcast the Easter service on television—an amazing question from someone near the isolated Afghan border.

Interested in a portion of the Kirghiz border claimed by China, I grabbed a taxi on the street and asked the driver to take me to beautiful Lake Issik-Kul. If I had known that the Soviets used the lake for secret experiments with torpedoes, I might have been more discreet. As it was, we did not get far. A high KGB officer stopped us on the outskirts of Frunze, took our chauffeur's driving license, and told me I could not go to the lake. When I tried to bluff, pointing out that the area was not clear on the Soviet map of travel restrictions, he said crisply, "Take it up in Moscow."

Finally we were given permission to visit a factory producing heavy, felt white and black Kirghiz hats, but when we got there the director denied having received any instructions. So all we could do was watch as the workers leaving the factory were frisked to see that they were not

stealing any material. Back in the hotel I had the satisfaction of complaining loudly about the Soviet pretensions of wishing to encourage tourism and hearing my complaint echoed by some bystanders.

I was amused that, when I had my hair cut, my lady barber called all the other barbers over to feel my hair, "just like that of a girl," so different apparently from the coarse hair of the Central Asians.

Our trip to Alma Ata, at the time the capital of Kazakhstan (which is now Alana), stands out in my memory for different reasons. It was supposedly the apple center of Russia, but I do not recall the apples. We were intrigued instead by a brochure advertising skiing, with a pretty girl in a bikini carrying skis. And so we began hiking to where we were told there was skiing. We only turned back when we found we were in a military restricted zone with the ski slope visible but clearly lacking in any ski lift. A typical example of Soviet out-of-phase planning: it is easier to issue propaganda than build a ski resort.

On the way down, hiking alongside us was a man with a striking resemblance to Leon Trotsky. On the bus he picked up conversation with us in rusty but idiomatic English that he said he had learned at the London School of Economics in the early 1930s. He was, he said, the overseer of the Baptist churches of Central Asia. He could have been a tough communist serving a different cause. He lost interest in us promptly when we told him that unfortunately we could not attend his church service that evening because we were going to the theater.

A second night we went first to a local football game that almost turned into a riot among the spectators, and then to a restaurant where we found ourselves stranded by a torrential downpour and no way to get a taxi. Finally a police paddy wagon drove up and invited us to get in. We laughed uneasily as the burly cop in the front seat, turned and said to us through the bars of our cell with a grin: "You won't get out of here in a hurry." It was a shock at our hotel when its honored foreign guests were delivered in a paddy wagon.