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From Chapter 1
Encounters with a Closed Society

"The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there."
—L. P. Hartley

The guests returned to their hotel rooms after the reception the night of the coup attempt, August 19, 1991. While I stood in the kitchen wrapping leftover mini-pizzas in Saran wrap, my mind flashed back to the days living under Soviet rule, an atmosphere that could be returning, from the look of things. I saw, like an old black-and-white movie, our earliest days in Moscow in 1965-1966, living in the student dormitories of Moscow State University. The gloom of a long, dark winter; the isolation and fear, grimness and monotony. Feeling discouraged and powerless, I eased into bed.

"This is where we came in," I mumbled to Jim as he dozed off. Unable to sleep even in our comfortable king-sized bed, I pictured our old dorm room at Moscow State University only eight miles away. I saw myself twenty-five years earlier lying on the narrow steel-frame cot, tugging on my small rough woolen blanket, green, with a white snow flake pattern, trying to keep my shoulders warm while preventing my toes from popping out at the other end and wondering what anyone over 5′4″ would do. Looking at the 12-foot ceiling looming overhead, a ceiling higher than the width of the room, I felt as if a giant had dropped me into a deep box.

Our last night in the dormitories, Wednesday, April 20, 1966, I had also lain sleepless. Fear had sharpened my sense of the room, revealing things I had not noticed before: the embossed flower pattern in the beige walls, the linseed oil and beeswax smell of the parquet wood floor, the dimness of the ceiling light we had left on as an amulet. A cockroach lurking in the shadow of the radiator had watched us. The tilted chair we had wedged between the door handle and floor to barricade ourselves in, as we had seen done in movies, had given the room an unsettling look.

Two feet away from me that night, Jim had lain on the identical cot, with the same controlled breathing. We had almost convinced ourselves that this barricade and our careful breathing could protect us from arrest and imprisonment by the KGB, the State Security Force commonly known as Secret Police. We were absolutely silent, knowing that our room was bugged, and that any inkling the KGB had of our unexpected departure could foil our plan. Although the long hallways outside the room were empty, I imagined I heard footsteps approaching, and flattened myself out still further

on the bed, trying to become invisible. Like Joseph K. in Kafka's *The Trial*, I felt we had been framed. Unlike Joseph K., we had some idea of what the accusation would be, but knew our innocence would make no difference. We, too, would be incarcerated, captive to the capricious will of arbitrary forces. Escape was all I could think of.

Jim and I had first arrived in Moscow on September 13, 1965, at 10:15 in the morning at the Belorussian Railway Station. I was 23; he, 26. We had been married for two years.

After ten days at sea and three more on trains, we were relieved to be greeted by professionally chipper Russian students equipped with a van, and a one-ton open-back truck with a canvas tarp, to collect us with our baggage for our trip to the dormitory. Our footlocker contained "stuff" for the academic year: clothes, pillows, Melmac plastic plates and cheap forks and knives, an electric frying pan, toiletries, sanitary napkins, deodorant, aspirins, toilet paper, Band-Aids… Our greeters, with English far more fluent than our Russian, had been hand picked—and gender-matched to us—by the Office for Foreign Students (*Inostranny Otdel*) to be friends to each of us for the year.

"How was your trip?" Nina asked me earnestly.

"We hope everything goes well," Ivan told Jim.

We piled our footlockers into the truck and ourselves into the van that headed for the "Old University"—the historic downtown campus of Moscow State University dating back more than 200 years. Right across from the Kremlin, these crumbling painted stucco and light brick buildings still held active classrooms, and housed libraries and offices for professors and administrators. We entered a decaying administration building. Stepping up over a two-inch threshold, the men ducking to avoid hitting the lintel overhead, we descended two unevenly worn stone steps, and walked along a concrete corridor to the office of student stipends. There an official counted out 200 rubles in cash to Jim, equivalent at that time to $240. Accustomed to the distancing of money transfers through checks, I was taken with the nakedness of a raw cash transaction, pay-for-study. But at that moment, I had no idea that cash was the only option: there was no credit card or checking system in Russia then, nor would there be for more than a quarter of a century.

We were fortunate, rich by our own standards. The 200-ruble stipend was generous, about four times what Russian students received. (Levels were set by official government agreements.) The money went far. Unlike Russian students, we had no need to buy clothing or household goods, and had no children or parents to feed or support. We could use our rubles for food, laundry, souvenirs, books, occasional travel and restaurants. The currency was not convertible to dollars, so there was no point

saving any of it. The ruble stipend was supplemented by a few hundred dollars of hard currency for the year, dollars we hoarded for our planned year abroad to follow.

With the cash in our pockets, we climbed back into the van to head for what was then called Lenin Hills. After driving along miles of mustard and tan stucco and brick buildings, we saw in the distance the newer Moscow State University. One of seven Stalinesque "wedding cake" buildings that dot Moscow, this massive white castle sits imposingly on a hill rising along a graceful bend in the Moscow River. How foolish, I soon learned, to try to get your bearings on any of these buildings, since they all look alike. The dormitory with its 17,000 students (we were told) covered well more than one city block on the ground, soared over 20 stories at its highest, and sat at the epicenter of radiating symmetrical structured gardens with tree-lined walks and formal plantings. Protected by giant fences, gates and guardhouses, the structure had controlled admission through a student pass long before U.S. institutions required any IDs or security measures. No one could enter the building without a pass, a *propusk*, but the only place to obtain a pass was inside the building. This experience made *Catch-22* easy reading later that year.

Despite its size, the building was well heated, freshly painted and cleaned. The four wings of the building were identical. Very few in the bank of elevators functioned. Most stairways were locked for reasons we never learned, but assumed it was either to control the building population, or to prevent the need for cleaning. We were grateful to be no higher than the sixth floor. But I marveled at the architectural irony of the structure: dedicated not to emperors but to the common man in a socialist state, its heroic proportions were so monumental and overpowering in scale as to dwarf mere human beings.

Designed to showcase Soviet life, to model the look of the future, the university building contained not only bedrooms, but also classrooms, libraries, bookshops, cafeterias, food stands, and well-furnished lounges on each floor. These common rooms, resplendent in Victorian potted palms, Oriental carpets, wood wainscoting, and stuffed chairs, hardly fit our picture of what Socialism or The Future looked like. But it didn't much matter, because the doors were tightly locked, except for three holidays a year, the November 7, January 1, and May 1 Soviet holidays. It also didn't take long to see that the bookstands carried a limited range of ideologically acceptable books, those surviving censorship; and the cafeterias and food stands stocked only limited fare. But some of these observations unfolded gradually over time like the red banners and buntings that were to emerge unexpectedly at holidays to brighten a few gray days.

On our first day, our student hosts led us through the gates and guardhouse. A guard blocked our entry, insistent on reviewing our full documentation. The guard was not only the first female sentinel I had ever seen, but also old enough to be my *grandmother*. (*There's so much to write home about*…my mental list was toting up…) Our escorts spoke to her in rapid Russian, and we were whisked through the gatehouse. Then, in our small suite, I was cheered to see we had our own toilet. It sat in a room so tiny it gave meaning to the term "WC" (Water Closet), and had a pull-chain flusher suspended from a high white porcelain tank. The students at other universities had only the hole-in-the-floor toilets, or seatless "western" toilets, in the shared bathrooms at the end of each floor. I felt not only far from home, but deep into the past.

Another little room contained our sink and stall shower. Two narrow bed-sitting rooms accommodated our two cots, along with two wooden straight chairs, two small wooden tables, two secretaries, two lamps, two small Oriental rugs, and two water flasks and tumblers. The rooms were comfortable for two, but normally housed four students, and sometimes their undocumented relatives. The rough-hewn wooden furniture and shoddy bath fixtures belied the building's youth, a mere 15 looking like 50. But everything I had seen so far seemed heavy, massive, and old…. I was beginning to feel weary—and hungry.

When we had caught the "Orient Express" from Paris to Vienna three days earlier, we had provisioned ourselves with bread, cheese, and fruit on the advice of our German friends Peter and Gerda. They knew the vagaries of train dining cars, and the limits of our pocketbooks. When we transferred to the "Chopin Express" in Vienna, replenishing our food supplies in transit, we found ourselves on a first-class Soviet train headed through Czechoslovakia and Poland to Russia.

Crossing through the "Iron Curtain," we entered another realm. Between 4:00 and 5:00 a.m., uniformed border guards burst into our compartment, shining bright flashlights into our eyes to jolt us awake. Their rifles were trained on our eyeballs. They barked commands that we knew meant they wanted to see our passports, declarations of currency, listing of goods, and other papers and IDs. One of the guards had a portable office strapped around his neck, a fully stocked desk protruding from his substantial belly: inkpads, stampers, pens, and documents. Other officials searched everywhere—under the berths, under the train; they poked and prodded. In some cases, they seized personal items. They didn't feel they had to explain themselves.

At the Soviet border city of Brest, the train halted. We were, I wrote my parents, "hauled out of the train, rounded up, and dragged from place to place to fill out forms,

organize trunks, and try to obtain a train ticket from the border to Moscow, with little success." Inexplicably, we were locked into a small one-room station house for reasons we never learned. Were they trying to avoid contaminating the local population, seeking smugglers, or simply harassing foreigners? With the help of a porter (paid a small gratuity: could that have been the issue?), and after a lot of shouting, we acquired the tickets, and re-entered the train. I felt anxious and unsettled.

Meanwhile, the train had its wheels changed. At all borders of the Soviet Union, train wheels had to be changed to fit the broader gauge of Soviet tracks. European tracks featured a narrower gauge. Although this seemed at first a whimsical, wasteful, or foolish oddity—or lack of planning—I learned it was none of these, but rather another kind of planning, a strategic effort to prevent trains from most of Europe—Germany, France, Poland, and others—from driving straight into the heart of the Soviet Union. As impenetrable as a fortress wall, the wide gauge tracks halted invasion by train. This was my first exposure to a larger world in which the experience of war and peace shaped people's thinking, plans, and lives.

We now crossed into the vast, gray lands of the Soviet Union. The borderlands, empty fields with giant coils of barbed wire, sprouted giant girders supporting brilliant floodlights—the brightest lights I was ever to see in the Soviet Union. Guards with heavy boots, machine guns strapped over their shoulders, faces set in serious-to-menacing expressions conveyed the sense that humor, charm, or lightness were alien to their spirits—and job descriptions. While the train raced hour after hour at high speed across Soviet lands, I began to grasp what Napoleon confronted when he attempted to conquer these Russian lands on horseback and foot, lands that were to conquer him instead. I pictured the settings for World Wars I and II. This was twenty-four years from the 1941 invasion by Hitler's armies advancing into Russia. And this was still before the first snow fall of winter. It looked very much like an old black-and-white movie of the fields of World War II.

Seven other American graduate students were on the same train, same car. After a night's sleep, we all met in the dining car over a satisfying breakfast of rye bread so dark it tasted caramelized, butter, fried eggs, and hot tea. For lunch we consumed our bread, cheese, and fruit in our compartment, looking out the window. And tea. A samovar in each train car burned charcoal to keep water steadily boiling to heat a little pot of concentrated tea leaves and water perched on top, and provide diluting water from the samovar spout below. A porter plied us throughout the day with glasses of hot tea, big sugar cubes, and plain white arrowroot cookies. In the evening, he delivered pillows,

crisp sheets and pillowcases, and one blanket and one towel per person. Tips (*na chai*—the words themselves meaning "for tea") were expected.

By dinnertime, I was struck by the contrast between the barren gray lands we crossed hour after hour, and the bright, warm comfort of the interior. Our first-class train compartment was decked out with a small Oriental rug, curtains, a table hinged to the wall under the window, a sink, and various hooks, racks, and shelves. The dining car sported an outfit of declining elegance, threadbare red velvet curtains with gold tieback tassel-pulls, frayed carpet, and well-laundered linen tablecloths and napkins. The smells escaping from the galley—sautéing onions; stewing beef; pan-frying potatoes; and soup steeping in its fennel, dill, and bay leaves—were reminiscent of the aromas that had filled the hallways of my New York childhood apartment building in winter when shut windows bottled in the concentrated smells of East European cuisines.

After showing us to our dorm suite on our arrival, our student hosts toured the corridors with us, past the locked lounge, to the common kitchen down the hall. I tried to count the people who would be sharing this kitchen, with its two small dirty gas stoves. (*That would be some twenty-five suites, of two to four people each, making, 50-100 people, could it be?)* The eight burners and two ovens offered unmodulated temperature choices: "on" vs. "off," and could be started only with matches (because there were no pilot lights). In the sink, murky gray water stagnated, unable to drain through floating fish scales and potato skins, sunken old cabbage leaves, and grease. And there was no refrigerator. The only pristine object in the room was the ironing board. What I didn't know then was that this room would bring us together with our neighbors too cautious to come to our room, or invite us to theirs.

There was Anna, diagonally across the hall, focused and thoughtful, soon to become a friend; not yet plagued with the mysterious ailment that laid her up for much of the year. Then Alexander and Maria next door, an attractive, gentle, and non-ideological couple from Siberia, almost finished with their graduate studies, and uneasily awaiting notice of where they would be sent for their first jobs. Directly across the hall lived a mysterious Middle Eastern student, Syrian, we thought, a man who spoke to almost no one—but at the Muslim feast of *Eid* roasted an entire lamb in the common oven, arousing interest and envy among Russian students with their very small stipends and limited diet. Even I was intrigued, seeing for the first time an intact mammal roasting, eradicating any myth in my mind that the lamb chops I ate were remote from an entire sentient creature.

Farther down the hall were Previr from India—who ate no meat—whom we came to know only later, and down the other way, Eva, one of two female graduate students in the American delegation. Most of the year there were about sixteen American graduate students, with four spouses, all wives; a few more came for the second semester. These, with a few others in Leningrad, were the only American students in the USSR. We also came to know two North Vietnamese men through an incident in the kitchen; four Mongol students, also male; and an assortment of other foreign students—a male and female student from Great Britain; a man from Nigeria; and many Soviet citizens of various nationalities and from various republics, including the mysterious "Charlie," who found us one day in that kitchen, and was to reappear in our lives during our later stays in Moscow. But the majority of students were Russian.

We left the kitchen as our hosts led us to the student cafeteria for lunch. On the stairs down to the basement, I felt my stomach flip from the smells of heavy cooking overlaid on layers of old food odors drifting up toward us from the meal hall. Torn between my good-girl training to be polite to our hosts, who were so effusive in their efforts to please us, and my gut instinct to skip lunch, I tried to act more gracious than I felt. But in my head I pictured the graduate dorms at Indiana University, even before the days of tempting food courts with a range of options that grace the campus today. Lunch might then have been a grilled cheese sandwich, or tuna fish salad, with an apple or banana, chilled milk, a cookie… suddenly, the food we grumbled about there seemed very tempting and familiar—and very far away. I heard behind me one fellow-American student in our group regaling another with stories of intestinal ailments that befell our forebears who ate here…while a little voice in my head whispered: "*Naomi, what are you* doing *here?"*

I let others slide their trays before mine in the food line. I was glad not to be first as the *babushkas* – literally, grandmothers, but used generically for older women—dishing out the food barked impatiently at us while various mystery-foods landed *splat* on our plates. My mind hadn't yet switched to Russian, so I was unsure what they were saying, but imagined that we seemed to them very slow and ungrateful people. We helped ourselves to forks—there were no knives—and a three-inch sheer tissue-paper triangle that was intended to serve as a napkin. I grabbed a recognizable slice of bread and a scoop of raw grated cabbage, both generously offered free for all students, so even the poorest didn't go hungry. The rest of the meal cost a nominal sum for us, but was too dear for many Russian students. I stabbed the gray, gristly stew, and decided we would

have to check out other options—the "professors' dining room," the food stands in the halls, and home cooking in the common kitchen.

The rest of our first day resembled that at any large institution. I told my diary:

"We ran around all day for cards, forms, passes, identification cards, foreign office registration—the usual bureaucratic disease is rampant here, too.

And now I must sleep."

The next day, I realized I would have to shop. I had heard so much about queues, I thought I understood why they formed: A desirable but scarce product showed up; people lined up to buy it. There was hardly a day when U.S. newspapers hadn't shown pictures of Russians standing in line, as if standing in line were part of who Russians were, the People of the Queue, victims of the failure of Communist rule. But although the reasons did include the failures of central state planning, they also turned out to be more structural and strange.

The first store I entered had separate counters for cheeses, sausages and cold cuts, and hacked up parts of cows, pigs, and lambs. Without refrigeration, these foods emitted pungent sour smells.

First, I went to the cheese counter, waiting my turn, while others elbowed their way in front of me, sometimes screaming at me in the process. At my turn, I managed to request, in careful Russian, and converting to metric system at the same time, "a half-kilo of *Gollandsky*—i.e., Dutch or Edam—cheese" (about one pound). A sturdy woman in a dirty apron cut, weighed, and wrapped my piece of cheese in a newspaper page, called out the price, "79 kopecks," and gave me a slip to take to the cashier. I then waited in the cashier's line, gave her the slip, which she impaled on a spike, took my money and gave me a new slip, with which I returned to the cheese line to claim my cheese. Three lines, one half-kilo of cheese. I shuddered to picture gathering the rest of the groceries. While I stood feeling sorry for myself (the voice in my head now querulous: "*What are you doing here?")*, I realized that I'd have to re-think my shopping. I would have to rove from line to line first, and order each of my purchases—250 grams of cold cuts, two half-liter bottles of soured milk, a bag of rice. Then go to the cashier with all the slips, pay the total, get new slips, and reverse my steps back to the line at each counter to collect my small purchases, hoping to remember which slip belonged to which purchase for pickup. The counter ladies became inflamed when handed the wrong receipt, and I hated being the object of their screaming wrath. I'd also have to remember not to leave home without my net bags – *avoski,* "just in case" bags—for toting things home, since there were no bags of any kind in the stores. Nor egg cartons. Eggs, when available,

would be counted out and placed into a piece of newspaper twisted into a cone. "Not putting all your eggs in one basket" suddenly made sense, even though there weren't any baskets.

Then I walked into Produce Store #83, which proclaimed "Fruits" on one smudged plate-glass window, and "Vegetables" on the other. It had thigh-high open wooden bins, each containing vegetables: onions, potatoes, carrots, cabbage, beets, parsnips. The produce looked old and worn, covered with the earth that sprouted each; the carrots were lumpy and wooden; the small onions and potatoes, rot-spotted; and the cabbages mottled. ("*Cooking and disguising these, that will be the trick,"* a bright voice in my head interjected.) The uniformity of the stores and their fare didn't promise any exciting finds.

Another store supplied dairy products, cardboard triangular containers of milk, sour from lack of refrigeration; and bottles of milk products designed to be sour—kefir, liquid yoghurt, soured/buttermilk products. With some sugar sprinkled on top, we soon learned, these drinks could become a staple of daily life. Meanwhile, although a variety of cheese-names filled each cheese case, it was hard to distinguish among them by taste. The hard cheeses, designated "Edam," "Swiss," and such, survived fairly well without refrigeration. The soft white curd cheese, like a farmer cheese or pressed cottage cheese, worked well with sour cream. Sour cream, I discovered, was as thick and rich as ice cream. It was popular served straight, with a little sugar on top, as a first course in restaurants, or as snacks in *bufyet*s (buffets). Jim consumed it often, long before anti-cholesterol advocacy had begun. Because there was almost no refrigeration in stores—even for meat, chicken, eggs, milk, or cheese—or in people's apartments (or in our dorm), it wasn't possible to stock a supply of perishables, but useful to have a few lasting products, some bread and hard cheese.

It seemed the perpetual Russian queues could be as much about plenty as scarcity: they were about systemic inefficiency and systematic control of consumer demand. And they worked. People's expectations for variety and freshness were not high; nor did they normally seek to buy great quantities. The possibility of stocking up with a loaded shopping cart at a self-service grocery was completely unimagined and about thirty years into the future. Actual scarcity, real or created through hoarding, added tension and mystery to the already difficult process of acquiring daily fare. Staples were the bellwethers: if bread, salt, or matches seemed in short supply, panic buying could then trigger a true shortage.

Happily, we found one secret to easier survival: small portable food kiosks and carts sprinkled randomly along downtown sidewalks sold ready-to-eat snacks. Before fast food became common in the States, Russians grabbed from little carts hot buns (*pirozhki)*

stuffed with ground meat and onions, or cheese or cabbage, and ate them on the run, counting them breakfast, lunch, or snack. Walking outdoors in the cold, we found these savory pastries very appealing, and also surprised ourselves by delighting in solidly frozen ice cream cones in mid-winter. Rich vanilla ice cream, packed to fill the inside of each cone—with an unexpected pink icing flower flourish on the flat top of each—came to be another staple for us, as for the Russians. We learned only during later stays in Russia that ice cream would also prove to be a source of cream for cooking, since there was no way to buy cream itself other than by deconstructing ice cream.

While my tongue reveled in the rich taste of ice cream, my stomach rebelled at another street treat: *kvas*. Dilapidated little tanker trucks dispensed this fermented brew in a shared drinking glass. Small queues formed to quaff the beer-like beverage, a low-alcohol drink derived from fermented bread. For decades, these quirky-looking spouted vehicles lived on the streets of Moscow (and elsewhere), until they disappeared in the early 1990s—although the drink itself lived on, available in two-liter plastic bottles.

The shared public drinking glass was not unique to *kvas* drinking, but also a fixture at public water dispensers. For a couple of kopecks, a person could acquire one glass of bubbly mineral water—as soon as the person in front had finished using the single glass, attached to the machine with a chain. I'll admit I was too squeamish to indulge in either drink, hardly the most intrepid traveler.

The entrance to the university was almost a mile from the nearest Metro train station. Although there were buses closer to the university gates, they were jammed, and lumbered only slowly to the station. So I found myself walking the uniform paths from Metro to dorm even on the coldest winter days.

Emerging from the Metro train stop at the university after one of my earliest trips downtown, I was drawn to a brightly lit, crowded shop. Called a *polufabrikat*, it contained an assortment of ready-made, prepared foods: stuffed cabbages; "beef stroganoff"—beef cut up for becoming stroganoff; cheese blini (crepe/pancakes); little *pilmeny*, like miniature Chinese steamed dumplings, but served with sour cream or vinegar; pancakes or croquets made of potatoes and carrots, or cabbage and potatoes, or cheese—ready to pop onto a pan for heating and eating; breaded meat cutlets; *bifstek*—or "beefsteak"—meat that didn't require a lot of stewing; hotdogs of various kinds (like German "wursts"); cold cuts of several kinds (in the bologna/salami family of "wursts"), always heavily laced with white dots of congealed fat; and "salad"—a mix of cooked peas, potatoes, carrot cubes, and mayonnaise. There was also a section for "Danish"

pastries of several kinds, all perfumed with vanillin. The shop was warm and inviting. Promising, I thought—at least for a few items.

Autumn in the Soviet era was always marked by the major national holiday, the celebration of the October Revolution of 1917, when the Bolsheviks had toppled the "Provisional Government" that had taken power after the Tsar abdicated. Observed on November 7th (because of the change in the calendar after the Revolution), the holiday sneaked up on us when we were new to Russia in 1965. While days rapidly became shorter and darker in late October, housekeepers and laborers appeared in the dormitory of Moscow State University. They unsealed the doors of the Victorian-style student lounges on each floor; cleaned and polished all surfaces (often with dirty rags); rolled out the red carpet (a cliché come true); and scaled scaffolding to hang enormous red banners and buntings. More lights were lit, illuminating by contrast how very dim and gray normal had become for us.

Because I did not fear arrest for photographing patriotic manifestations (as opposed to numerous other arbitrary but punishable offenses I might commit with my camera), I took many photographs of the university decked out in celebratory gear. At the time, I did not much value these photos, which seemed formalistic and sterile. I do now. Today when Americans consider Soviet history, we spotlight the red banners and buntings, the martial displays, the exhortatory posters, as comforting evidence of an inscrutable but static, structured past. But in their original setting, those images seemed greatly stylized, hackneyed, and uninspired; even irrelevant, which, in part, they were.

Winter came. Our room faced north in a straight line to the Arctic. Icy winds rattled our double windows and leaked in around the edges, freezing the sausages sitting on the inside sill. We stuffed the cracks around our double windows with rags and paper, wedging small pieces into crevices with a knife, then taping the stuffed cracks shut with masking tape we had brought with us. Then we piled all the clothing we were not wearing at the moment on and around the windows' edges, to stem the drafts, changing supplies daily while we exchanged warmed outfits for chilled ones.

The winter of 1965-1966 was one of the coldest winters in Russian history, a history not lacking in cold. For a long spell, the temperatures dipped down around 40 degrees below zero, rising sometimes only to zero F. When accompanied by cutting winds or frozen fog—air filled with suspended droplets of ice—it seemed even colder.

When I walked the mile walk from the Metro station to the dorm, ice crystals formed on my eyelashes, brows, and the front of my hair peeking out between my hat and the scarf across my nose and mouth. A photo captures me standing among a row of frosted

trees, ice drops clinging to my eyelashes, bangs, and eyebrows, the rest of my face, hair, and neck wrapped tightly in hats and scarves. Everything around me glittered as I viewed the world through the diamond dust coating my eyelashes. The handkerchief in my coat pocket froze stiff, crisp as a potato chip.

Indoors, I prepared dinner. Little beef chunks and sliced onions soon sizzled in the electric frying pan in our room. Beef cuts were anonymous: hacked up chunks of muscular cows that could no longer provide milk. It seemed more gracious to cook the beef in our room than to flaunt it in the common kitchen where most Russian students, too poor to buy beef, relied on bread, potatoes, cabbage, sausages and cold cuts, cheese and soup.

The hearty meat smell that filled the room covered layers of stale odors: traces of old garlic and onions; beeswax and oil rubbed into wooden floors; damp woolen coats. It almost felt like Christmas, that icy December of 1965. The Russians were scurrying to buy gifts, gather delicacies, and prepare for the big New Year's holiday and the visit by Grandfather Frost (*Dyed Moroz*). Close to 40 degrees below zero outside, and I was warm and content preparing "Beef Magu," a special, named by our British friends, to play on the Russian acronym for Moscow State University, "M.G.U." (*em-geh-oo*). "Beef M.G.U./Beef Magu." The recipe was always the same—sauté onions, sauté beef chunks, add a little water, salt and pepper and cover pan; add potatoes and carrots at the appropriate time, and cook until the beef became tender enough to chew.

That afternoon in a burst of year-end cleanliness and recognition of limited supplies, I had decided to clean the three dish sponges we had brought with us for the year—and couldn't, of course, replace. So I set them up—a pink one, a yellow one, and a blue one—to boil in a little pot of water on the stove in the common kitchen, and went back to our room to read for a while. When I returned to retrieve the sponges, a crowd had formed around the pot, sniffing, looking, and questioning one another.

Buzzing, they surrounded me.

"Is it sausage?" one man asked.

"No," I said, "it isn't."

"Then what is it?" someone else asked.

"Sponges" was a word I had never been taught in Russian. These neighbors tossed a succession of possible Russian words at me to try them out, while I fielded each by shaking my head harder. Even the universal language of mime failed me, in my attempt to demonstrate the use of a sponge. Still looking skeptical and baffled, they left, without understanding, it seemed. These were not exotic bright pink, blue, and yellow sausages,

as they thought, or, in fact, edibles at all. But I could almost see them musing, scratching their heads, asking, "*Then why cook them?*"

The idea of cleaning sponges by boiling them had occurred to me only after seeing the laundry room in the basement of our dorm. I knew that we would have to find some way, beside using our little bathroom basin, to wash clothes. In a city of some seven to eight million people, there was only one laundromat with modern (American) machines. To reach the facility required two buses, followed by standing in line for a few hours. That didn't inspire me.

Then in the basement I found the "laundry." For thousands of students, it contained one four-burner gas stove, one huge kettle/pot in which to boil water, a long wooden stick to stir the clothes; and two non-automatic agitator washers (ca. 1942 vintage), each with a hand-turned wringer. (My head was buzzing, *time warp, time warp*.) Only four items of clothing were allowed in the little washer at one time—two pairs of pajamas or four tee shirts. No rinsing, only washing was allowed. In one corner of the room sat an industrial-strength, gray-green iron centrifuge to be used only by the official housekeeper of the room (*dezhurnaya*), she as iron-willed as the machines. In another corner on a table sat a non-electric flatiron, a heavy piece of solid iron that had to be heated on the stove, then used to press clothes – a tool for the intrepid only. I found the dank basement room at the end of long, dark tunnels like a scene from a bad dream, and knew I'd go there as rarely as possible.

I watched students arriving to wash their clothes. They carried one outfit and stripped down to their underwear to wash their other outfit, the one they were wearing. Without self-consciousness. They dropped the clothes into the huge pot of water on the stove and boiled them with flakes of soap they shaved off a bar with a small knife. Then they rinsed the clothes by hand, wrung them out, whirled them in the centrifuge (or, rather, surrendered them to the keeper of the machine), and then took the clothes back to their rooms to string up to dry (giving real meaning to "I have nothing to wear"). In the powerfully heated rooms of winter, drying didn't take long. But I wasn't surprised years later when washers and detergents quickly supplanted socialist theory as items of interest and discussion.

I used the quaint little washer (skipping the pot-boiling part), wrung the clothes, and carried them upstairs to rinse and dry. I rinsed them in the yellow plastic dishpan we had brought with us, one of the most valuable items we imported.

But by flouting the set system, resisting stages in the formal laundering process, I left the housekeeper angry and frustrated. At the time, I thought her an old witch. She

resembled the toothless harridans in fairytales. Her angry epithets of my ignorance and incompetence pursued me, echoing down the basement hallways.

"Girl, girl…" and a string of accusations. I pretended not to understand her screaming demands. She probably knew I was pretending.

But one day walking down the hall, back to our rooms, with my dripping load, I pictured her going home at night and telling her grandchildren the grievances of her day: what unseemly habits and disobedient attitudes these foreigners have! And only years later, did I come to feel compassion for this tired old woman with a 41-hour a week job in a dark, damp basement, disrespected by the students.

I didn't want to be there any more than she wanted me there. I had followed my husband Jim to Russia. We were not idealists nor ideologues, just graduate students. Jim had majored in Russian history and literature at Harvard College, then in Russian studies at Indiana University's graduate school and Russian and East European Institute. He had succeeded in his application to become an exchange student to the Soviet Union under the Inter-University Committee on Travel Grants awards, later to become IREX, International Research and Exchanges Board. At the time this was virtually the only way for an American to study in the USSR.

I was a Ph.D. candidate in history and had agreed to go along for the company and experience. We agreed we would spend the following year in London where I could complete research and writing of my Ph.D. dissertation on the ferment of ideas surrounding blasphemy, heresy, and political subversion in revolutionary 17th-century England. Was it religious heresy or political subversion that Cromwell sought to obliterate? Was there a difference?

Cultural history—ideas that underlay "Western" thinking—intrigued me. Because I had to give up a fellowship from the American Association of University Women to go to Moscow, we agreed to save from our fellowships and assistantships to accumulate the $3,000 we would need to get through the following year in London. And so I became in Moscow an unintentional observer of an incomprehensible land.

When I re-imagine the times, I picture the United States we left behind, led by President Lyndon Johnson building up troops and war efforts in Viet Nam, with U.S. involvement growing in all aspects of the war. "American Planes Reported Dropping Napalm Bombs in Vietnam" was a headline of the times. Johnson, having filled President John Kennedy's term after his assassination in 1963, was one year into his own term as elected

president. Headlines of the period read "Johnson Installed; Stresses Great Society" and "LBJ Signs Civil Rights Act."

Meanwhile, popular culture was taking a new turn with the advent of the Beatles. "Beatles Invade America," one headline read. And miniskirts appearing on the scene for the first time elicited headlines, debates, and cartoons.

In the Soviet Union in which we landed, Leonid Brezhnev ruled as First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (and later as its General Secretary). He had ousted Nikita Khrushchev from that position about a year before we arrived, "surprising most observers," the newspapers said. From what we could see as soon as we arrived, virtually all visual and visible signs of Khrushchev's period, his legacy and rule, had been totally obliterated. Mentions of Khrushchev, his actual name, his speeches, pictures, and memory were completely eradicated. It was as if he never existed. He had truly become a non-person. Very eerie. Brezhnev's rule meant not only the disappearance of Khrushchev and his reforms, but also a return to Communist orthodoxy and a hardening of the Cold War atmosphere. "Soviet Union Is Now Using Spy Satellites" was another headline of the time.