

The Russian Man Without Any Trousers

I found Denis and Sasha on the stairway outside the sixth floor of a dormitory wing of Moscow University. They were seated on the steps, furiously smoking cigarettes -- Marlboros, their favorite.

"Oh, we were just coming to see you," Denis' eyes lit up, perhaps a bit embarrassed that they were something of a half hour late. He reached into his blue day pack and presented me with a farewell gift, a biography of Lenin by his associate Tucharensky. Inside the book were the real treasures -- antique post cards of Odessa and Moscow before the Revolution.

"His family has the best post card collection in Moscow," the lanky dark Sasha informed me. Denis, his blond cheery comrade, smiled proudly.

"I will always treasure these as tokens of our friendship," I told Denis, oozing the solemnity which had permeated my environmental delegation's semi-official visit to cover my discomfort that I had no such special gift to leave with my two young Soviet friends. They had helped my tour group on our trek through Volgograd and the Volga River, translating, schleping luggage around, but mostly giving us insights into the character of young Russians and the turmoil which was sweeping their country four years into the Gorbachev era.

I settled in on the stairway landing with them, and we launched into a feverish exchange on everything that had happened to us in the week since we had seen each other. When the conversation lagged, Denis sang American and British rock hits. He knew every word and was surprised that I didn't.

"What are your favorite bands?" I asked.

"Depeche Mode and Manhattan Transfer," he shot back immediately. The first group I considered logical for their social messages; the second seems to be most popular in Moscow. Denis learned a lot of his English from these songs, savoring the words and phrases, and trying them out on anyone who would let him practice his new patois. Among these young people the roots of revolution lay as much in Rock and Roll as in perestroika or glasnost.

Sasha liked the same music, though he wasn't quite as quick with English. It was hard to tell if he was hesitant to practice or if he was just a bit more reticent than his exuberant sidekick. Sasha did recite a rhyme for me as an example of the official phraseology found in their English textbooks:

*"The Seventh of November
The Great Holiday
And all the Soviet people
Are happy and gay.*

*They go to Red Square
To see the Kremlin wall
And the Lenin Mausoleum
Which is dear to us all."*

He and Denis chuckled at the quaintness of it in light of the changes that were sweeping their country.

This was Saturday, my last night in the Soviet Union, and I had only had a tantalizing taste of Moscow. Virtually everyone who travels to the Soviet Union visits Moscow, but for me and my partners on the environmental delegation exploring conditions on the Volga River, it had been a quick in-and-out as we headed to the industrial region seven hundred miles south. There in Volgograd we encountered a bewildering array of environmental crises ranging from the declining sturgeon population to industrial contamination of water supplies and air as foul as any this Los Angeles resident has breathed. Now I was back for one last night with two student guides who knew the town. I had rubles, and I was confident we could have a great time.

"Let's go get a bottle of vodka for my last night in Moscow," I proposed.

"Oh, no," they looked at me in shocked surprise. Denis impatiently informed me: "You have to get vodka much earlier in the day, before noon, especially on Saturday."

"There must be some somewhere," I said. "I've got rubles and dollars."

"That won't do you any good at all," Sasha scoffed.

For a stylish Last Supper, we headed down the marble staircases of Moscow University and through its long cavernous corridors to the cafeteria in the basement. We piled our plates up with cabbage, potatoes, and some beef -- a good basic meal at an incredibly low price.

Denis and Sasha both protested when I tried to pay for their dinner.

"No, we will pay for yours," they insisted.

The dining room ebbed and flowed with the swirl of hungry students on a Saturday night as Denis and Sasha filled me in on startling stories of the happenings in the Soviet Union. Oh, I had heard accounts of some of the same incidents, but I was shocked that two eighteen-year-old students would be so informed on events across their country. They recounted riots in Tbilisi, Armenian frictions, and dissent in the Baltic republics.

As in Volgograd, Gorbachev was central to our discussion. The American media was still treating Gorbachev in a virtually uncritical manner, so I had been startled by the breadth and intensity of the criticism directed at him that I had encountered. I told Denis and Sasha of a dinner at which an American had offered a toast to Gorbachev's program of reform, and the Russian host called out, "Nyet, Nyet, Gorbachev. We are Yeltsin people here." Another Russian scolded us: "You Americans give too much credit to Gorbachev. You think he created perestroika and glasnost. He did not. We did," he said emphatically, "and he has had to accept them."

With what I took for wisdom beyond their years, Denis and Sasha seemed more ready to give Gorby some space.

"There are tremendous problems here with bureaucrats. They are determined to undermine Gorbachev's program with fake shortages and economic sabotage," Sasha said. "I think he is doing about as much as is possible."

"We have a real problem with beer," Denis informed me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We can't get any," Sasha earnestly broke in.

I roared with laughter, but they didn't see the humor in the situation. Gorbachev's much ballyhooed crackdown on alcoholism had created unforeseen problems besides the long lines for Vodka.

"People are hoarding sugar and any form of alcohol for the production of homemade liquor," Sasha said.

"Oh, bootleg liquor -- moonshine," I said and explained the American experience with prohibition.

"People have gone blind drinking it," Sasha said.

We had plenty of parties and drinking during my two weeks in the Soviet Union, and Denis and Sasha shared in many of them. I don't remember seeing either of them drunk, but they were proud of their drinking prowess. Sasha, who was wearing a "Tufts University" T-shirt, (anything with English writing being the ultimate trophy), told me of a sports team from that Pennsylvania university which they had hosted the previous spring.

"They went out and got a bottle of Vodka and had a party," Sasha said, "and when we came to wake them in the morning, they were all drunk and hung over. Just one bottle, and there were six of them!" he told me. "To a Russian man, that would be a disgrace!"

"Oh, let's go down to the river" Denis suggested. "You will appreciate the Ecology Trail down there," he added with a wry smile. So after we finished dinner we walked down a beautiful wooded path from the University to the Moscow River.

It was about six thirty, and evening was beginning to set in. As we walked, Denis pulled from his magic daypack a book filled with photos of the Brezhnev era. "The period of stagnation," my two friends contemptuously called it.

"Look at these happy coal miners," Denis fumed. "They are now on strike. Look at our beautiful lakes and rivers, which we now know are polluted. I want you to take this book," he presented it formally to me, "so you can know what they were telling us."

It was impressive to hear such bitterness from someone who wasn't even a teenager during that stultifying period.

Sasha joined in with Denis regaling me with more stories of ethnic unrest, corruption and crime. They filled me in on organized crime syndicates and a vicious anti-Semitic society known as "Memory" that blamed Jews for all the troubles in the Soviet Union. They told me of the murder of a journalist by mobsters.

I was struck by their wide-ranging knowledge of such social conditions. "How do you know all this," I asked.

"It is all in the newspapers now," Denis said.

As close as these two sidekicks were, they disagreed on the solution to the ethnic problems besetting the Soviet Union and particularly the Baltic republics.

"Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania should be allowed to go," Denis said.

But Sasha said, "No, the whole union will fall apart if we allow that."

As the sun was setting, we looked back at the imposing visage of the University of Moscow. The tourist books label the structure "Stalin Gothic," but Denis and Sasha beamed as they looked at it.

"Oh, we are very proud of our university," Sasha said.

We headed to Lenin Hill, probably the most popular viewing spot in the city. There were gathered hundreds of Soviet citizens taking in the panorama of downtown Moscow on a pleasant August evening. From the rail at the top of the hill can be seen several of the other major buildings which constitute Josef Stalin's architectural legacy -- the Foreign Ministry and the Justice Ministry. Just off to the right on the hillside is a massive ski jump and across the Moscow River is Lenin Stadium, used for the 1980 Olympics Americans never saw.

That day Lenin Hill had hosted scores of wedding parties as newlyweds brought their families and friends to this scenic spot to toast their future bliss. In stunning testimony to their exuberance, the whole area was strewn with champagne bottles and plastic cups.

Denis and Sasha had taken me to the Ecology Trail that runs from the viewing area down to the Moscow River to illustrate glasnost and show me the sad state of ecological consciousness in their society. When we read the weathered sign at the beginning of the trail, they discovered that it was their Young Communist group who had built the trail just two years ago.

As we wound our way down the Ecology Trail through overgrown bushes and trees, Denis and Sasha tried to outdo each other in pointing out all the bottles and debris littering the area.

"I wish they wouldn't name places ecology trails," Sasha said with disgust. "It just attracts the alcoholics."

Denis told me that there had been a Run Against Hunger along the river in April.

Since I knew he was a runner, I asked Denis: "Did you run against hunger?"

"No, we drank against hunger," Sasha blurted out. He and Denis both broke out in wild laughter pointing out the spot where they downed their vodka while the runners raced by.

As we approached the river, the path became much steeper. I gingerly picked my way down it, while Sasha and Denis dashed down the steep embankment laughing all the way.

At the bottom Denis knelt on the stones which lined the bank of the river and reached in to feel the water.

"How is it?" I asked.

"Great," he smiled.

Sasha went to the edge of the stones to see for himself. There he knelt down and reached into the water, but he stretched too far and plunged headlong into the river. The splash splattered Denis and me as Sasha bobbed in the slow but steadily moving river.

"He can't swim," Denis shouted.

Sasha peered at us plaintively through the water of the Moscow River. Dread swept his face as both arms flailed out, trying to catch on to something, anything. I got ready to dive into the water, but before that was necessary Denis grabbed Sasha's outstretched arm, pulled him toward the shore, and steadied him on the rock ledge. Sasha coughed out some water and caught his breath, and then we pulled him onto the rock-hewn shore.

Sasha burst out of the water and danced on the shore with frantic excitement, jumping up and down, sopping wet. Denis was right there comforting his pal. Almost immediately, as if they were the only things worth worrying about, Sasha dug deep into his pants' pockets and pulled out his Russian cigarettes. "Who cares?" his face read as he cast them to the ground. Then he reached into his shirt pocket and fished out his prized pack of Marlboros. He hurriedly opened it and

pulled one out. It crumbled in his hands. "Fuck, shit," he exclaimed loudly in precise English. Furious, he grabbed the pack with his left hand and flung it into the river.

Sasha, soaking wet and disgusted at his loss, took his shirt off and wrung the water of it. It splashed on the stones. Then he removed his blue Tufts T-shirt and his soaked athletic shoes. Denis stood close by holding on to steady him.

As a puddle formed on the rockwork, Denis showed Sasha the long diagonal stain on the seat of his white pants. So Sasha stripped down to his underpants and stretched out on the stone at the river's edge to try to wash out the smear. Denis knelt next to him grasping his legs so that he wouldn't plummet into the river again.

"Would it be alright if we waited here about twenty minutes to let my clothes dry off?" Sasha asked me deferentially.

"Of course," I replied.

He and Denis hung the clothes on the tree. Then they settled underneath and began to chatter away in Russian, being careful to periodically fill me in on the highlights of their conversation.

Denis kidded his brooding companion about how funny it was to hear him shout, "Fuck, shit!" in English when he discovered his cigarettes were ruined. No doubt about it, Sasha is too cool.

The lean Sasha sat on the curb in his underwear, his black hair sweeping across a sad face frequently punctuated by laughter. Fortunately it was a mild Summer Saturday night, so it wasn't too cold. I sat on the bank next to Sasha, and Denis squatted on the stones in front of us as we traded stories and jokes. Twilight highlighted Lenin Stadium and the river scene as a large tourist boat rolled by, then a barge, and finally a jogger who didn't look at all puzzled by this unlikely scene on the banks of the Moscow River. He did, however, double back just a few minutes later.

The night grew darker, and a peaceful calm settled in.

"Are you cold?" I asked.

"No," Sasha assured me through a gale of shivers.

After about an hour, we decided to leave. Sasha put on his T-shirt, which draped him halfway down to the knees, and then a major disagreement broke out with Denis.

"He doesn't want to put on his shoes," Denis excitedly told me. "I reminded him of the briars on the path." Sasha stuck his feet into his American sneakers, but he wasn't happy. "They are so cheap," he complained, "I've only had them a couple of months."

Then another Russkie dispute erupted. Sasha, as if appealing to a higher authority, turned to me: "Is it alright if I don't wear my trousers." He was clad only in his underpants, his long T-shirt and his sockless sneakers.

"I don't know," I replied, feeling very much the foreigner, unsure that I understood all the implications of the situation. "It doesn't bother me," I added. "You do what you want."

So we proceeded up Lenin Hill. Sasha's long legs stretched out from beneath his blue T-shirt, his shoes still sloshing with water. Denis dutifully carried his friend's shirt and soiled white pants.

Up the hill we slowly climbed until the sightseers came into view at the top. As we approached the two hundred people who still lined the low-lying rock wall at the top, both Sasha and Denis broke out in spirited dialogue in loud English.

When we passed the crowd, Denis confessed to me, "Sorry we had to do that."

"Do what?" I inquired.

"Oh, speak loudly in English," he replied.

" Oh, that."

"We had to, though," Denis explained, "because we wanted them to think we are Americans."

Now I was beginning to understand.

"Anything Americans do is alright," Sasha chimed in. "But if they saw a Russian man with no trousers," he said emphatically, "why he would be arrested!"

As we walked back through the tree-lined mall back to the university, we all pondered the strange situation that now cast the Soviets' historic superpower rival as their new role model -- for better or worse.

Suddenly a car approached us from behind. It slowed to a crawl as it passed us. The fear was palpable. Is it the police, we all wondered. Then the car stopped. Worried, Denis pulled up and eyed Sasha nervously. Sasha shrugged his shoulders with a defiant "So what?" and went on undaunted.

Despite Sasha's state of undress and our lack of appropriate passes, we blew past the guard gate at the university, again employing the Ugly American strategy. I waved in an overly friendly manner at the guard, and we all laughed and blabbered away boisterously in English.

As we walked down the long hallways of the university, an African student walking the other way smiled broadly as he spotted us. Denis and Sasha, now confident in their American roles, barked loud English "Hellos" to him without even realizing until he was past that he had been a classmate of theirs and had probably caught the incongruity of the situation.

That wasn't a surprise. Incongruity my two young Russian friends had taught me is as thick as the air in the Soviet Union today.

Tim Brick
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