



Dimitri Sokolenko

# HOW I ESCAPED FROM THE USSR



**Published by Fultus Corporation**

*Dimitri Sokolenko*

*HOW I ESCAPED  
FROM THE USSR*



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**How I Escaped from the USSR  
(from the Notes of a Citizen of the Universe)**

by

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## *Chapter 1.*

While still in the Soviet Union, I decided that someday I would write about my escape. I invented titles for the book, and dreamed about starting it while flying over the Atlantic on my way to America. While waiting for the flight in Italy, I noticed that something strange was happening to me. On the plane, I glanced out the window, and saw the whole of Great Britain below me as though it were on a map. I remember thinking that we were flying too high! Everything seemed confusing. Either normal hepatitis produces hallucinations, or I had contracted a special Indian type.

There was no time to become a writer when I arrived in America. I thought several times about my plan. One page was written in the suffocating heat of summer, but the rest was abandoned. I postponed the book until the future when I would be rich and have time to write. In December of 1988, without any obvious reason, I suddenly realized that I should not wait until my retirement to write this book.

A very long time ago, I decided to escape from the USSR. One newspaper article claimed that this heretical plan came to me when I was ten. I can't remember saying that to anyone, but perhaps it's true. Of course I would like to explain why I escaped, but this would be much more difficult than simply recounting the story. I don't want to bore you by telling my version of Russian history. I will also skip over my family history, and early education. Long digressions such as these are good for voluminous memoirs, which, as it is well known, no one reads. I will limit myself to the following: I was born in Siberia in the University town near Novosibirsk. I attended the schools like all normal Soviet children; that is, I did not receive any education. I graduated from college like all normal Soviet youths; that is, I learned nothing. I worked for four years in a scientific institute like a normal Soviet young man; that is, I produced nothing.

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I will try to describe my escape chronologically, but this is not a diary. I already know "what promises tomorrow has for me"<sup>1</sup>. Many episodes seem now unimportant; my fears during the escape now seem pointless. But I knew nothing of the future then; not even about the coming day. For example, the Indian border guards, armed with antiquated weapons seemingly from the time of the Sepoy rebellion, were terrifying then. But now I realize that they paid no attention to me at all. Only the owner of a small store on the Nepal side of the border guessed that something was not quite right. He had difficulty reconciling my wild excitement over a seeing a bottle of Russian vodka with the Tsarist two-headed eagle on the label, with my story that I was an Italian and my traveling companion an Arab from Bahrain. The store owner grinned maliciously, and whispered something to the small boy cleaning the store. I left the store, and spent the next few hours expecting the officials to come after me, but no one pursued me. There was no chase, but I didn't know that. My fear was real.

I have no shame about my fear; to be bold is to overcome fear. Sometimes, I am still frightened. I am even a little frightened to write this story. You must agree that it is not pleasant to open a newspaper and see the headline "KGB Political Murderers Abroad". Someone was killed by the poisoned tip of an umbrella. Should I sit home and not show my face when it rains? Wouldn't it be better to sit at home and never go out? Maybe I would be missed, maybe not. To be a nobody is the safest plan.

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<sup>1</sup> from Alexander Pushkin

## *Chapter 2.*

We can tell many things about a country from its behavior with the dead. I can't forget how impressive the Soviet funerals were: there is nothing more distasteful. A wintry day, with temperatures well below zero. From the fifth floor, they are struggling to carry the coffin down to the waiting truck, a truck large enough to carry five tons, which an hour ago was transporting bricks. The driver is evidently wavering; he can't decide whether to remain for the funeral banquet, at which he can get drunk for free, or to go back to the construction site and continue stealing the roofing slate. The bed of the truck has been covered with a cheap carpet; just behind the cab stands a large piece of sheet metal holding a Soviet tin star and a photograph of the deceased which is destined to become the monument over the grave. Who originated such a travesty? A simple stake driven into the ground would make a better memorial. Chairs for the bereaved surround the casket in the open truck bed. Near the truck, two trumpets, a drum, and cymbals are playing none other than Chopin's funeral march. The musicians are real professionals; lesser performers could not invoke such anguish. In the middle of the piece, the trumpets start to play out of tune, the cymbals refuse to play with the beat, only the drum is still keeping to the music: boom....boom...boom. The wind is carrying the beat of the drum across the mountains of plowed snow to distant neighborhoods. People come to the windows, but no one except the old women stay for long. The mourners take their places around the coffin, and the truck departs for the cemetery. The frozen air is not too painful for the passengers as the truck inches its way along city streets. Then it reaches the highway. The coffin arrives at the cemetery which has the harsh sounding ancient name "Cherbuzie". The coffin is lowered into the frozen ground. Mercifully, the noises of the drunken musicians are lost on the drunken mourners.

These moments always brought me thoughts of immortality: how could I avoid dying here and becoming a participant in such a ceremony!

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Perhaps now you can imagine my state of mind shortly before my escape. Try to imagine someone writing an absurd farce, and performing it on stage as though it were serious. You are required to attend each daily performance, whether you like it or not. Worse, the spectators are applauding, and seem to be satisfied. Your neighbor chastises you to be quiet when you start to laugh or protest, even if you do it softly. Comparing life with the stage is trite, I know, but there is no better analogy.

Farce! This word gives you all the nuances of Soviet life. There is reportedly a torture called "music box", where the victim is forced to hear the same melody over and over again. Even the most resistant very soon become hysterical. The Chinese water torture has the same effect. Tell me how to escape the slogans, newspapers, trade union meetings, May 1st demonstrations, subbotniks (forced voluntary labor "donations"), literally endless lines to get an apartment and thousands of other lines. Tell me how to find the strength to keep from spending your life arguing with fools. Every day is the same; even if you have no ambitions to succeed as a Soviet citizen, even if you choose to live your life as a pauper.

In December of 1985, I was walking the streets of Moscow without any purpose. As with all people who travel to Moscow from the provinces, I visited the shops looking at things unknown in Novosibirsk. I don't want to describe Moscow: the city disgusted me. It is not surprising that while there, I definitely decided to flee the country. In one of the shops I purchased twenty large flashlights for my friends. They bulged from all my pockets and filled my arms. The street was cold and uninteresting; even worse than the hotel. In one of the side streets, I discovered the offices of FinAir, the airline of Finland. The window display had palm trees, the ocean, and the word "Hawaii". Only one who had spent ten years in a damp dungeon, and was brought to a Roman banquet, could understand how I felt at that moment. How poor and joyless was Soviet life around me! It really wasn't a life; it was more of a living tomb. Chopin's funeral march had finished playing long ago for the living.

An old woman carrying a net bag loaded with sausages elbowed me on the sidewalk. She looked small and weak, but she almost knocked me down. Two Georgians with mouths of glittering gold fillings were dressed like teenagers at a disco;

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they must have been over fifty. At the corner was a rosy-cheeked cadet officer ("commissar") from the military-political college. I am sure he would have crossed to the other side of the street if he had known my thoughts. And here I was with flashlights hanging from every pocket. As darkness fell, it started snowing. I had no desire to go away, but remaining here was becoming tiresome. On Gorky street, speeding militia cars with wailing sirens preceded curtain-windowed limousines. "You are still my master, but I am not your slave..."

I first saw the border when I was in Armenia. Guard towers stood watch over miles of barbed wire; the Martian machines straight out of H.G. Wells' War of the Worlds. Nearby, a narrow river, and Turkey on the other bank. There is nothing of interest to see there. Only the voice of the muhadzeen calling from the nearby minaret served as a reminder that this was another country. It was very exciting to catch my first glimpse of something outside the prison walls. But this was not a place for escape. Perhaps I could bring a hot air balloon in my rucksack and fly at night, using the moonlit snows of Mt. Ararat as a guide. But this was too romantic an idea. There were many other ways: one could escape from Latvia to Sweden's Gotland island using an inflatable rubber boat with a motor. Or, one could walk across the ice in the Bering strait to Alaska. You could cross the Pyandzh River into Afghanistan, then cross the mountainous Afghani corridor into Pakistan. You could join the ski expedition to the North pole, but head in the wrong direction, and end up in Greenland. You could work on the fishing boats in the La Perouse strait separating Sakhalin Island from Japan, and... How many times I measured the map distance from the Cross Bay (Zaliv Kresta) to St. Lawrence Island at the western tip of Alaska. If I was kept in Russia by force, then it was necessary to escape. Do you understand?

The need was clear, but the means were not. It was impossible to even approach the border; a special pass was required. The ethnic children living near the border areas were raised from infancy by the authorities on stories about foreign spies. Even the little boys will cling to you, trying to examine your documents. In spite of the thousands of kilometers of border, there are few places to escape. What about China? But is it better there? To Mongolia? You would deserve a mental hospital. To Iran and the Ayatollah? Unfortunately, I was born a

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heathen dog. The border with Turkey is guarded so well that an army couldn't get through. I recall that even on the shore of the Black Sea, two hundred kilometers (120 miles) away from the border at Batumi<sup>1</sup>, the border guards would continually stop me with hostile questions. I was an object of suspicion just for walking out to the shore. The interrogations lasted over an hour. I studied the officer closely; was he in fact a fool, or just consumed with boredom. Probably both. My answers were clear and coherent; I knew where I was born and educated. But this was suspicious in itself; I had a good story, proper documents, and spoke Russian without an accent.

Eastern Europe? At one time it was the best choice for an escape. But now, thanks to the cooperation of President Roosevelt, it is the largest no man's land in the world. Finland has returned escapees since shortly after a man named Ulyanov<sup>2</sup> used the route to flee the Tsarist Okhranka police. It is impossible to reach Norway via the Kola peninsula: there are too many military installations. I have mentioned all the possibilities; there aren't even any others to joke about. I won't mention crossing the Pacific; only the rich, brave yachtsmen attempt it. Hijacking a plane wouldn't work; I could only kill in self defense. Of course, I am not a pilot myself. Lord Byron would have had a hard life as a Soviet. It was easy in his lifetime to board a ship and say good-bye to a hated fatherland. There was only one possibility, which seemed fantastic in its simplicity. This was to leave as a tourist. I didn't know: would they let me travel to communist Bulgaria, if not a western country?

I was disqualified as a Soviet tourist on almost every count: I did not have a wife and children to leave behind as hostages. I was only 25; the minimum age for travel was 28. Most important, I was never a member of the young communist league (Komsomols). This alone was enough to wreck any chance I had.

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<sup>1</sup> A heavily guarded Georgian city on the Black sea coast on the border with Turkey, populated by Ajari moslems; a favorite place escape from Russia by small boat.

<sup>2</sup> Who used the pseudonym "Lenin" for most of his life.

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But Mikhail Lomonosov, who broke Russian law and custom in the 1780's to rise from a poor fisherman's son to become the father of Russian science, said "the harshness of Russian law is diminished by half by its misapplication". I gambled that this was so, and won. I can only wish the traditional Russian curse that the hands of anyone who combined Russian law with German thoroughness would shrivel and drop off.

Returning to Novosibirsk, I went to the office which handled foreign travel. I crossed the threshold certain that they would shoo me out, or arrest me. I was excited, and thought that my face would give away all my plans. Eyeing the list of countries allowed, I was not encouraged. Czechoslovakia was of no help, and I was sure they wouldn't give me a Mediterranean cruise. Maybe I should fly to Cuba. They say the plane makes a stop in Canada. Maybe there would be engine trouble, and we would make an emergency landing in Florida. India; it was worth considering. What did I know about it? It seemed to me that the leaders were not communists, yet. This was a good sign. But the government called the Soviet Union its close and good friend. This was bad, but it made it easier to get permission to travel there. Indian officials could not be trusted; I knew that for sure. They would trade you for a part to a MiG fighter without lifting an eyebrow. Perhaps I could use the opposition newspaper for publicity. But I wasn't anxious to use myself as a test of the genuineness of Indian democracy. Perhaps I could get to the American embassy there. How would the Indian police guarding it treat me? Even if I could get in, would I be given asylum? Sometimes I imagined the Marines playing Yankee Doodle while a helicopter carried me from the roof to an aircraft carrier waiting offshore. But then I would imagine the lifeless eyes of an embassy bureaucrat refusing to help me.

I made my way through the crowd to the desk where two women employees were sitting. "I'm interested in Vietnam", I said. "I would like to see some elephants." "There are none in Vietnam, only in India" they answered. Feigning surprise, I said that India would be interesting also. They handed me the papers, and told me to return them with an autobiography, six photographs wearing a tie, and a characteristic, a document issued by the supervisors and party officials at my job, which describes my moral, political, and work attributes. I did each of these. You couldn't find a question which wasn't asked: who is

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your mother? your father/ any relatives abroad? didn't your grandfather urinate in his bed?

Characteristics. The most important document for a Russian. It is considered positive only if written in the most pompous, glowing language, without a single reservation. The Soviet bureaucracy inundated the population with paperwork, and was itself drowning in the sea of forms. The mountain of receipts, stamped and signed documents and three page questionnaires about a citizen is so voluminous that it would be impossible to find the time to read them all to find out about him. The paperwork saved me; no one could discover my desire to escape from reading it. But I could tell within two minutes of meeting someone in person whether he would flee. I wouldn't need to know his grandmother's last employment before the 1917 revolution. I wouldn't need to know how actively he was participating in the social life of his collective at work. I didn't enlighten the bureaucrats about my plans; let them rely on their papers and forms.

I composed the characteristic by myself. The muses lifted me to the summit of socialist prose, and I worked hard. Later, the local newspaper abundantly quoted this document, commenting on my hypocrisy. But there was none; only the most gullible fool would take seriously what I wrote. Some of the document was truth itself. For example, "Comrade Sokolenko is continuously working on expanding his political knowledge, attentively studying party documents and governmental policy statements." They should add that, in the pursuit of these goals, I was greatly hindered by the jamming of the western radio broadcasts which illuminated these issues. "Comrade Sokolenko is able to convincingly defend the advantages of Socialistic life." This statement was probably untrue. What do you expect, the truth? I couldn't bring myself to write "Comrade Sokolenko frequently proclaimed himself the enemy of the Soviet State; continually works on anti-Soviet propaganda; and participates in the dissemination of anti-communist literature." How many roadblocks there were in planning a simple trip to India just to see the elephants!

The characteristic had to be signed by my immediate supervisor. In truth, the supervisor should have written it as well, but this was never the practice. The signatures of the president of the Worker's Union, the Party Committee

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secretary, and the directors of the Institute where I was employed were also necessary. The Party committee must approve it, and it needed the official stamp of the Institute. My superior signed it unread, and instructed me not to stay in India. "All right" I answered, "I will stay only if I find a girl friend there." As it turned out, I didn't like Indian women, so I kept my promise to him, and did not remain in India. I spent two days trying to find the Worker's Union president, and finally caught him in a corridor. I had been a union member for several years, but had never seen him. He had never met me, but signed the paper without a single question. The assault on the Party Committee was next; not in a literal sense, but the idea had a place in my soul. I would have to face them, trying to figure out what to say. Like a suspect under interrogation, I would have to think over every word, lest I say too much or too little. I would have to pretend to smile and joke and discuss seriously those things which couldn't be. How cheerful to be a hero in a cowboy movie. You kick open the doorway. Everyone awaits your next move with baited breath. You march up to the bar with spurs jangling. But even the worst saloon in the worst western ever made was a more respectable place than the best Party Committee meeting.

Party Committee...something chilling and lifeless. The place where romantic or idealistic thoughts find their death. The place where stupidity, mendacity, and banality rule. I am not a fan of surrealism, but I am sure that it would require a Salvador Dali to successfully paint a Committee meeting. Imagine a bust of Lenin emerging from the head of the first secretary like a chicken from its shell, or Jesus Christ crucified on the sickle and hammer...

I opened the door and entered the room. No fewer than a dozen committee members were seated at a long table. I felt confident; I am a bad actor, but this role was easy. Everything in the room was familiar to me since my childhood. I became a Soviet man for half an hour; no lie detector could betray me. The secretary read aloud my characteristic; no one laughed. Perhaps their sense of humor was not well developed. This happens occasionally. There were many questions; I can't remember them all. They asked: Do I read newspapers? Of course. Yesterday, for example, there was a long article about the committee secretary of the city's Komsomol being

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promoted after stabbing his girl friend. I hoped to steer the conversation away from the awkward questions about my having never been a Komsomol member. No one raised the issue. But then I grew afraid that they would think that the newspaper article expressed my opinion about the Komsomol in general. Warily, I looked at the faces around me. Why did it mention the Komsomol at all? Perhaps they would never have brought it up. All of the young people my age were members. The characteristic doesn't mention the organization at all. I had to distract them. I talked with animation about Gorbachev's latest proposals about disarmament, translating in my mind from the language of the western radio broadcasts into Soviet newspaper headlines. "Aren't you a Komsomol member?" I heard at last.

For weeks before the interview, I was pondering how to answer this question, inventing sympathetic stories in the best melodramatic tradition. I finally decided that only a boring, uninteresting story would be accepted as the truth. You couldn't penetrate those metal skulls with a breathtaking subject.

"You understand", I said, "I was studying in Riga's 'Red Banner Institute of Engineers of Civil Aviation in the Name of the Leninist Young Communist League'". They accepted into the Komsomol only the best students." All the committee members nodded in agreement. They were thinking that they take everyone, and then end up with many troublemakers. "I completed the application, but, on the last exam, I received a 3rd degree (satisfactory). They told me to wait until the next exam to join the Komsomol." One member asked "You got a 3rd degree on the next exam?" "No, a 2nd degree (unsatisfactory)" I responded with uncertain voice. I saw that this story reminded them of times when things were better. I noticed with relief that they liked my story. After a short discussion, they approved my characteristic unanimously. For some reason, they told me to add to it that I was a calm man with an even temperament.

I rose, walked slowly to the door, went out, and closed the door behind me. I didn't feel the ground beneath my feet, and must have floated from the third floor to the ground. I ran through the knee-deep snow, not even trying to find the path. Wagner's march sounded from the skating rink. The skaters were dancing in the light from the spotlights. Venus was shining above the

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pine trees near the bazaar. The crowd of drunken, swearing, youths was hurrying towards the bus stop. Without surrealism, how could one describe all of this life in juxtaposition to the Party Committee?

## *Chapter 3.*

The time came to forward my documents to Moscow for approval for the trip to India. Nothing happens in Russia without the consent of Moscow. I tried to imagine the bureaucrat's office in Moscow on whose table my papers would arrive. Perhaps at that very moment, a stern KGB major in the heart of the Lubyanka, perhaps in the very room where the portrait of Dzerzinsky hung, was opening the envelope and reading my characteristic. He pushes a button, and two plainclothes KGB agents are on their way to Academgorodok.

Of course, it didn't happen that way. A bored functionary quickly scanned my papers, and, not finding any violations of the most recently issued rules, approved them.

For the next three months, nothing interesting happened. I was informed that my trip would take place in the middle of May. I awaited the date without any anticipation, being absolutely sure that, for one reason or another, they would not let me go. At times, I completely forgot about the trip; my life continued as before.

About the 20th of April, our travel group had its first meeting. This was the first time I had met my fellow travelers. They seemed to be normal Soviet citizens; they held no interest for me. I won't take the trouble to describe them. Olga Yevgenyevna Chernomorskaya, head of the agency in charge of travel to capitalist countries<sup>1</sup>, gave a speech. She is one Russian I remember. Her speech lasted four hours. Unfortunately, I don't have a transcript of her speech, or I would repeat it here in full. I'm sure my pen doesn't have the strength to describe this speech filled with boorish, common,

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<sup>1</sup> The Soviet constitution guarantees free travel anywhere to its citizens. Therefore, a special bureau controlling travel to Western countries should not be necessary. The contradiction was resolved by creating the agency, but giving it the misleading name.



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trite, banal phrases, almost insulting in its attempt at familiarity and companionship. "We are white people" she yelled, while pounding on the lectern with her fist. "Don't forget this when you are in India". "You are not only a tourist, but a representative of the Novosibirsk region, winner of two awards". A few years before, she had visited India by herself. Now she was ordering us to see the sunrise above the Himalayas, visible from the airplane on the way into Delhi. Her description of the sunrise took about forty minutes, in amazingly poetic language. "Strictly follow the rules for behavior of Soviet men abroad" she repeated time and time again. Do these rules exist? I don't know; no one ever showed them to us. If they do, they must consist of only one phrase: "Be an obedient sheep, and Baa when you are supposed to."

After she had spoken, the KGB representative was next. I expected to hear the usual stories about the CIA, but instead, he cautioned us not to steal from the stores, and not to steal the telephones in the hotel rooms (they would be worth about 150 rubles on the black market back home; this was a favorite money making activity of Russian tourists). He told us a story about one woman, a professor with a Ph.D. in philosophy, and a Communist Party member, who donned 15 pair of underwear in a store in Hungary, then tried to leave without paying. Is there any point in writing fiction these days? Then our group supervisor, a very unkempt and nervous woman, ran to the lectern. "Did you hear that?", she yelled at us. "Anyone who can't understand that will never go abroad again. Yes. Yes. They would never travel again. Never!" The KGB agent then gave her his parting blessing: "May you return with as much as you departed with."<sup>1</sup> I have to admit that I was shaken by this warning, but it didn't matter. A few minutes later, the list of those traveling was read. My name was missing<sup>2</sup>! I approached Olga Yevgenyevna, and asked if this meant I definitely was not included. "Call me in a week", she answered. I was sure that there was no point in making the call; they weren't letting me go this time.

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning number of people.

<sup>2</sup> It was common for several people in a travel group to ultimately be denied permission to go.

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The first days of warmth after the long Siberian winter came. The sun was higher in the sky; the hated snow was finally beginning to melt; I stayed outdoors as long as possible each day. But this spring was betraying me like all of the previous ones; I was to remain a prisoner for another year. I wandered through the town, constantly immersing my boots in the rivulets and pools of melting snow. I always had a powerful desire to see something new in the springtime, even if it meant a change for the worse.

I called Olga a week later. I meant to ask if I could travel to Bulgaria this time, if India was not possible. (This would enhance my Characteristic, and improve my chances of eventually traveling to India.) Instead, I heard the forceful command of Olga: "You Pay". No, she wasn't demanding a bribe, just telling me to pay for the travel expenses. They were letting me go! Humans don't obey the physical law of conservation of energy. Just a few minutes before, I had been dragging my tired body through life, all of its energy stolen by the Soviet state. Every movement of my body was painful. I felt like a clock which hadn't been wound in years. Words are not fashioned from matter; they have no mass. They can't be transformed into energy by multiplying by the square of the speed of light. But why was I able to run down the street, jumping into the air? How had the great weight been taken from my back? Passers-by, whom I had hated with great passion, now seemed nice and pleasant people. The communist slogans on the streets and sides of buildings, which are unnoticed by ordinary Soviet citizens, used to cause me to gnash my teeth. They had now changed into funny, naive, sayings of some aboriginal people. All of the blunt contradictions of Soviet life became just historical anecdotes told as dinner conversation. Thus I prepared to leave for India.

My last day in Novosibirsk; the weather cold and gray. I walked to the railroad station, shaking from the cold wind, funneled into gales by the tall apartment buildings. Electric trolley buses passed by, with their moaning and creaking and thundering sounds. Diesel and gasoline buses pulled away from the passenger stops, with great billowing clouds of smoke. As usual, everyone was hurrying; everyone was worrying. I bought a belyasch (a meat-filled pastry) for a few kopecks from a street vendor. I bit into it a few times. The meat inside was

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green and rancid. I cursed, and threw it to a dirty, homeless, dog. In the movies, such meaningless, sorrowful, urban landscapes are accompanied by solo saxophone passages.

The railroad station, built in Stalin's time in the shape of a locomotive, was huge, and jammed with people. A small, plaster statue of Lenin stands with hand outstretched to the bright future. Unfortunately, there is no future here, only the present. Energetic cleaning women passed by, flinging their wet mops back and forth, forcing families asleep on their baggage to scatter. Demobilized soldiers in parade dress were drinking kefir (liquid yogurt) in the buffet. Unshaven vagrants kept watch for unfinished bottles. Students wearing canvas windbreakers were gathered around a guitar player, singing student songs about campfires and train whistles. Two militia were searching Armenian construction workers on their way home, extorting bribes from these well-off proletariat. Babies were crying incessantly. An old man wearing World War II campaign ribbons on his overcoat had his head buried in an issue of Pravda. A collective farm worker wearing a traditional keпка (hat) was dragging a motorcycle tire behind him. Near the ticket windows, a fight broke out among the mass of people jockeying to purchase the few available tickets. The militia deserted the Armenians, and waded into the middle of the fight. A bald combatant with gold teeth had his arms pinned back by the police. The loudspeaker announced a train for Biysk<sup>1</sup>. Students grabbed their rucksacks, and ran to the platform.

In the station, I recognized some familiar faces. My group was waiting, friends with each other already. They were making a list of duties. The person in charge in each compartment on the train had been chosen, except for number seven. Someone already knew the price of leather jackets in Bombay. Another had private information about the best place to exchange cigarettes for necklaces, although no one had any real need of cheap Indian jewelry. "Anyone who can't understand that will never go abroad again" I heard again, and knew that this was surely my group.

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<sup>1</sup> Small city in the foothills of the Altai mountains; popular place to start backpacking trips into the mountains.

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The train to Moscow accelerated, crossing the wide Ob river on a familiar bridge. Two barges loaded with wood going in opposite directions passed each other on the river below. Life in motion is not so dull as that which is stationary. The landscape out the window continually changes before it becomes boring. Chimneys of the factories; concrete apartment buildings with infinite rows of windows; flimsy car garages made from sheets of thin metal arranged like a gypsy camp; villages of impoverished dachas made from every possible material; pedestrian walkways across the tracks; small stations serviced by only a fraction of the trains; telegraph lines hanging from insulators universally broken by vandals; piles of used ties; oil tank cars sitting on sidings. Beyond the windows of the train, the continuously changing world gives you a feeling of hope; there is an illusion of freedom. What will happen to me in a week? In a month? In a year? I only know one thing for sure: everyday life is finished for me, thanks to god.

There were three others in the compartment; two young, one old. I've forgotten their names already. The trip to Moscow takes more than two days. There is nothing to do on the train, except drink vodka. While crossing the enormous Barabinsk steppes, the old man, somewhat drunk, was swearing constantly. "Where is all the cattle? Where is the livestock? Communists destroyed them all." In other times, I would agree with him. But now, I kept it inside. I just lay on the top bed, trying to imagine myself near the gates of the American embassy in Delhi. My young companions discussed methods of smuggling their trinkets past customs, and how to avoid the Sikh terrorists.

Moscow. A bus took us to the Ismailovskaya hotel. Bad news. Air India was on strike, and the trip might be canceled. We went to the restaurant to continue our vodka party. My companions tried to get me to dance. I told them to go to hell.

The next day, I aimlessly wandered the streets of Moscow; the same streets of late winter. The Hawaii poster had been removed, all else was still there. The same crowds, the same lines, the same street construction. Occasionally, I traveled by underground metro; visiting station after station without purpose, emerging at Gorky Park or Red Square. In a small park, a man was standing on his head. Near him, a metal chain served as a leash for a cat. Returning an hour later, the man

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was still on his head; obviously one of the famous Moscow anti-socialites. I passed the American embassy on Tchaikovsky street. The squad of Russian militia standing in the shadow of the Stars and Stripes made a strange impression. Good news. The strike had ended.

The morning of May 15, 1986, we left for Sheremetyevo International Airport. We assume that, at important moments of our lives, we must have some special feelings. But I remember only the buffet on the ground floor selling "Pushkin's Tales" chocolates and black caviar sandwiches, items never seen in stores for Russians. I only remember that it was unshamelessly clean. I remember the two foreigners laughing at us tourists marching in formation behind our commander. The loudspeaker in two languages announced the departure of the flight to Delhi. Breaking formation, we ran to customs. One of our suitcases revealed several packages of pencils. "Not allowed", stated the customs officer laconically. "Throw the pencils away" yelled our commander. En masse, our group began the purge of kilograms of pencils from the suitcases. I didn't have a single pencil; I had brought a bottle of Soviet Champagne, a bottle of vodka, a carton of Bulgarian cigarettes, and a few other items only to avoid standing out from my fellow travelers. These items looked innocent on the x-ray device; every Soviet tourist, after all, is an amateur smuggler. Here it was, the enchanted boundary. There was a booth, with a soldier. Give him your passport, and his eyes will fix on you with the look of a vampire, comparing your face with your picture. "Farewell, my fatherland", I said softly to myself, trying to impart a look of importance to my face. As the plane climbed above the airport, I sung the first measures of Oginsky's *Polonaise*<sup>1</sup>.

Soon, stands of birch trees typical of the central Russian district of Ryazin began appearing below us. But soon the Afghani mountains touched me more deeply. I looked down with fear, imagining a stinger missile chasing us. Alas, we didn't see the promised sunrise above the Himalayas; instead, we saw the

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<sup>1</sup> Well known piece in Russia. Not well known is its history; written by Oginsky as he left Poland, and originally titled "Farewell my Fatherland".

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sunset over the Hindu Kush. As darkness fell, we were told the plane was over Pakistan. Our commander did not let the time go to waste; she was busy repeatedly counting us, apparently suspecting that someone had a parachute hidden on board. She prohibited conversation with the stewardesses; conversation with foreigners was not allowed<sup>1</sup>. In the Indira Ghandi Airport, she acquired new concerns. We had 32 people in our group; her first count totaled 29, the second 35. Initially, I had planned to escape on the last day of the trip. Suddenly, I couldn't stand it any more. I couldn't look on the faces of my compatriots without become nauseous. I could hardly keep myself from doing something foolish.

"So this is India". Nothing special, I observed. Then I saw the first sign we were in the orient. A girl and a boy stood at the entrance to the bathrooms, opening the doors for everyone entering with obsequious bows. I gave the boy a cigarette; his artificial smile made me sick. Soviet people are slaves, not by birth, but by their conditioning. Here in India, for the first time in my life, I saw genetically bred slaves; slaves who have found their ecological niche. Nimble boys pitched our bags onto the air-conditioned bus, and we were brought to the Samrat hotel in downtown Delhi. In the back seat, the war veteran still displaying his medals was staring at the sides of oncoming trucks, decorated with the ancient Indian symbol, the swastika. Entering the hotel, we were told that the next day we would fly to Shrinigar, Khashmir. I have to run now, I told myself. For the first time, I grew agitated. How many times had I talked to my friends about this moment; how many times had I thought of it; finally the moment was at hand.

It was hard to keep a calm appearance. A few people had already asked if I felt ill. Fortunately, they were all busy with their own problems. We were all tired from the trip. Otherwise, my inability to eat anything in the restaurant would have raised their suspicions. I had lost all of my instincts for chewing and swallowing. The someone said there was an Indian tradition to not leave anything on the plate; we were to lick them clean. My licking reflexes, for boots or plates, had also disappeared. My

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<sup>1</sup> It was considered very un-Soviet to initiate conversation with a foreigner.

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chance, I was assigned a room with the old man from the train. Two years ago, I went to Rumania, he recounted. My roommate on the trip sold his Russian passport, and drank the proceeds. The bastard spoiled my vacation, he said to me on his way to the shower. I always have bad luck with vacations. While he was out of the room, I found the telephone directory. With trembling hands, I located the number of the American embassy. With disgust, I saw that not only was the listing for the Russian embassy nearby, but the embassy itself was next door. I dialed the number of the embassy, but hung up immediately. What was the point? I barely spoke English. There was a second phone in the shower to worry about. So I went to bed, intending to wake very early and make my escape from the bathing pool in the hotel. Lying in bed, my mind was in chaos. My muscles were twitching nervously.

Forty minutes later, someone knocked on the door. Wake up, I heard, we want to show you something. My roommate mumbled something incoherent, and turned away. In the corridor, I saw the other two companions from the train. Let's go, they said. We will show you a more luxurious hotel room than you have seen in any movie. Yes, their room was luxurious indeed, even by Western standards. Three rooms with arched ceilings, walls decorated with plants, oriental rugs, expensive furniture, flowers in vases, and bowls filled with fruits. As our commander slept unknowingly, ten people from the group gathered in the room. Women with envious looks were examining the sofas and wardrobes. Awestruck men were examining the mechanisms of the toilets. Someone ran to get his bottle of champagne, another started entertaining us with stories. A loud party was in progress. Well, I examined the sofas, paid my respects to the toilets, drank some champagne, heard a few anecdotes....it was time to go, I thought.

I spread the drapes apart; it was dark outside. Beyond the clouds, heat lightning flashed. Fortunately, there was no rain. Pretending to be sleepy, I mumbled a few words, and stepped into the corridor. It was empty. Slowly, I descended the stairs, straining to catch any noise. Near the hotel entrance, a few Indians were sitting; they paid no attention to me. Making sure once again that I wasn't being followed, I exited to the street. Now I had become a candidate for arrest by the KGB. It was long after midnight. Hundreds of Indians were asleep on the

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grass nearby. Some lazily turned their heads to watch me. Three cows, sacred to the Hindus, half dead from starvation, wandered down the street. A man clothed only in his underwear stood atop a small barn, exclaiming to the stars. Hot and humid air brought smells of the garbage dump. I turned the corner, and started to run.

"Anyone who can't understand that will never go abroad again". These words resounded in my ears, spoken in the severe voice of our commander. I spied a taxi. In Russia, I had read that Indian taxis were black and yellow, with the meter installed on the hood. Rejoicing, I realized that at least something the Russian tour guides said was the truth. I had only thirty roubles in my pocket. The Indian rupees were to be given us tomorrow. I decided to offer the driver my watch if he refused the rubles. If he declined the watch, I would offer my East German jacket, which was in good condition. If he refused the jacket, I wouldn't pay him at all. The driver was asleep on the back seat. I pulled on his foot through the open window, and told him in one of the few English phrases I knew to drive to the American embassy. The driver awoke, and without question started off.

It took no more than two minutes. The car stopped near some iron gates; the driver told me we are at the embassy. I gave him a 10 ruble note, preparing for a protest. He only asked for another. Perhaps we are at the Russian embassy I thought, looking into the darkness for a flag or an inscription. The gates were lighted, but there was no writing on them. It would be funny to ask for asylum in the Soviet embassy.

An Indian policeman approached, and asked what I wanted.

"I urgently need ask about my friends in America."

"Are you an American citizen?"

"No, I am a Soviet citizen" I showed him my passport with the hammer and sickle.

The policeman raised his eyebrows, and invited me to his small booth near the gate. The other officer sleepily examined my passport under the light of the table lamp, and asked me to be seated. I felt very decisive. I knew that the worst possibility was a quiet arrest and return to the Soviet Union. If they refused me entrance to the embassy, I thought, I would have to create a tremendous scandal. I had no idea how I would go



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about it. At least there were foreign journalists in India. There were even some opposition newspapers. As a last possibility, there were the Sikh separatists. Or I could make a stand right here, assault the Indian policemen, and stage a diplomatic fight from inside an Indian jail. While I was contemplating these bold alternatives, one policeman was making a phone call. Who was he calling? Americans? The police? The Soviet embassy? Radzhiv Ghandi? Tamali rioters? I felt adrenaline by liters flowing through my veins. From the corner of my eye, I kept watch on them. If they tried to arrest me, I would run. The office hung up the receiver, and invited me to follow him. It appeared that we were going to the embassy, and no handcuffs were in evidence.

We walked in complete darkness, stumbling through bushes, passing a pool filled with croaking frogs, arriving at a big illuminated house with columns in front.

"Isn't it hot?", the officer asked.

"O yeah, especially after Siberia."

"You are from Siberia? It's cold there."

Worrying, I desperately looked for an American flag. I was assailed by doubts. Was this the Soviet embassy? Worse, an ironic smile appeared on the face of my escort. Even if I saw the flag, it could have been a trick. Near the doors to the building, two Marines were waiting for us, one white, one black. A negro, I thought joyfully, this must be America. No KGB agent in the world would pretend to be black just to trap me. The Marines noisily slid back the bars locking the door, and I entered the embassy. The doors thundered shut behind me.

"I am a Russian runaway. I want political refuge," I said in English the phrases I had repeated to myself daily for the last few months. The Marines smiled, shook my hands, clapped me on the shoulder, and brought a coke from the refrigerator. It looked like a meeting of old schoolmates. My imagination had painted this scene in the dull colors of Rembrandt, as if I'm standing in the fading light, with an expression on my face worthy of at least half a hundred reviews by the critics. At my side, two Roman centurions in full battle dress emphasized the importance of the moment with spectacular gestures. But there was no need for a floor-to-ceiling painting with a name plate

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"Dimitri Sokolenko finds Asylum in the Quarters of the American Ambassador". Alas, everything was different. We were having a party. Rivers of coke were flowing. Marines found a map; I showed them Novosibirsk; they showed me their hometowns in the US. I hardly understood spoken English, so they wrote their questions on paper. Finally, the black Marine brought a typewriter. An eavesdropper would have heard "tap-tap-tap-tap-oh yeah-of course-tap-tap-tap-tap-laughter".

They grew serious when an elderly man wearing glasses entered the room. He asked me in Russian with an English accent:

"Why did you come here? Are you drunk?" Not disguising his skepticism, he demanded to know who I was, where I was from, and what was the purpose of my visit.

"All right", he finally said, "sign this paper, but you must know that it will be very difficult for us to help you." He handed me an application for political refuge. The Marines, without conversation or smiles, searched me, and took pictures. I was advised to rest on the sofa; the door was closed, and I was left alone.

Can one sleep in this situation? I lay awake on the sofa until dawn, recalling the unencouraging look of the man in glasses. Less than 24 hours had passed since my departure from Moscow, and here I was testing the softness of the ambassador's sofa.

At dawn, a young man entered the room, and handed me a large black hat befitting Don Basilio in the Barber of Seville, and glasses with false lenses. Donning the spy's attire, I followed four escorts out the front door of the embassy. In daylight, everything looked different. It was less than 500 feet from the gates to the entrance. The frog pool was only a small puddle. The bushes were small plants easily bypassed. My convoy majestically proceeded in step to the gates, two men by my side, one 20 paces ahead, one 20 paces behind.

Where were they leading me, I wondered. Maybe they want to give me back. I knew that the part of the roof overhanging the nearby trees belonged to the Soviet embassy. But if that was

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the case, what was this masquerade? Why did I sign the papers?

Everything became clear shortly. The living quarters for the embassy was located across the street. This was our destination, and my residence for the next four days.

In recounting this first part of my adventures, I have purposely tried not to describe details of life in a Soviet state. Many pages would be required to tell of the process for obtaining ration coupons for sausages; the art of queuing to buy vodka; how to see a doctor or hospital; the systematic theft of food from public cafeterias, and so on. All of this is interesting, no doubt, for those who know a little about life in the Soviet Union. However, these details are not interesting to me; I cannot write about them. Now, being on the threshold of the West, it becomes hard for me to resist the most minute descriptions of each event; I want to write about every minute. I probably would have, if I had started the book when I first came to America. The first few days in Delhi for me felt like a child discovering mountains of expensive toys under the Christmas tree. If they gave me a cookie, I insisted on having the entire box; not from greed, but because I wanted to examine each inscription on the package in detail. I was able to stare for hours at the pictures on the package. Everyone was touched by my inability to open a pop-top can of beer; I had never seen one before. The Marines I was living with were the crew of Captain Cook encountering a South Seas native; they brought one toy after another for me to explore. Every night, a Marine with a portable transmitter would enter my room, barricade the door with a bed, and conduct secret transmissions every 15 minutes: "Eagle; eagle; this is bear..." My pidgin English improved significantly; I even carried on a discussion about the moral shortcomings of Playboy magazine, which comprised most of the library of my prison cellmates. My friend with glasses from the Embassy visited occasionally. He would appear suddenly as though he had popped up from the ground, and disappeared just as suddenly. At one point I even pulled back a corner of the carpet to see if there was a secret trapdoor for him to use. He became more and more sociable, telling me anecdotes about Soviet power. He asked if I had noticed that the blotch on Gorbachev's forehead was almost exactly a map of Afghanistan. He brought a VCR and some western movies.

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But when asked how my case was progressing, he would only reply in pidgin Russian "Very want to help. Very difficult."

On the fourth day, they told me that I would be taken to the United Nations Bureau on Political Refugees. I would not be returning to the Embassy, but would be given lodging in a safe place. "It is hard for us to keep you in the Embassy", my friend explained. Again I donned the hat of the rumor monger<sup>1</sup> of Soviet reality, a T shirt reading "Malaysia-Beautiful Pinang" donated by the Marines, and the false glasses. I had wondered a few times whether my friend's glasses were fake as well. At the suggestion of the Embassy, I had not been shaving, and now looked like the typical unkempt Russian scientist performing his month's obligatory service in the potato fields<sup>2</sup>. It certainly was becoming harder and harder to recognize me. In the company of two others, we started out the for UN office.

I had been in India almost a week, but now saw it for the first time; the windows at the embassy residence had been tightly closed. I stared with amazement at the bicycle-driven rickshaws and the crowds wearing the chalma turbans on their heads. Where was I? How did I get here?

In the U.N., we were met by a middle aged Dutchman with the face of a poet who spends sleepless nights composing in his attic. He directed me to a chair in the hallway, as the translator had not arrived yet. The Americans said good-bye, and left me alone in the corridor. A few young people were wandering about, apparently with nothing to do. One of them sat down, and asked:

- Listen friend, give me a smoke.
- I don't speak English, I answered.
- To give a smoke you don't have to speak English, he responded.
- I don't have any cigarettes.
- Where are you from?

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<sup>1</sup> The occupation of Don Basilio in the opera.

<sup>2</sup> Required of virtually all Soviet scientists, with few exceptions.

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- Nowhere.
- What country?
- No country.
- France?
- No.
- Germany?
- No.
- Danish?
- No.
- Russian?
- Nooooooo.
- Swedish?
- No, I'm from the moon.
- Good for you.

Suddenly, the Dutchman appeared, grabbed my sleeve, and yanked me into his office. He talked to me at length, but I understood nothing. Fortunately, the translator appeared. These young people in the corridor are Afghans, she explained. "Don't tell them you are Russian; it's not safe". She spoke Russian very well, so I suspected that she was a KGB or embassy official. But it developed that her grandfather was a white officer in the Russian Civil War. After the war, he escaped to France, where she was born. She translated everything I told her for the Dutchman into French. There were common questions: who I was, where I was from, and why I was there.

The Dutchman completed the paperwork, pushed it aside, and asked me again to explain why I was running away.

- Isn't it easy to understand? - I shrugged my shoulders.
- Imagine that I don't understand anything. Try to explain it to me.

I breathed deeply, ready to begin a long tirade about the lack of human rights in Russia. But, looking into his sad eyes, I cut it short: "Come on, you understand".

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His eyes brightened; he apparently liked my answer. Tonight, he will write a poem about me, I thought. I would like to read it.

- I am more than convinced that, to smuggle you out of the country using legitimate UN channels is impossible, while tapping on my papers with his fingers. If the Indian police arrest you, nobody will be able to help you. I start to feel sick at his words. Thinking that the Dutchman was impressed with heroic postures, I announced "I'm not afraid of anything."

- Well, he said, it has to be pondered. That's all for today. - Noiselessly, he stepped to the door, and examined the corridor.

- Nobody there, let's go, he whispered. Wait, I will bring a car, said the translator, who left first. I followed the Dutchman out the back door, past a hall filled with excited Indians. He was keeping to the wall trying to pass unobserved, but all of the Indians saw him and waved a greeting as he passed. We left the UN building by climbing down from a balcony. A block away, we found the translator waiting in her car. "Quick, get into the car" I was ordered. He then said good-bye, and turned back towards the building. The translator happened to be talkative. During the ten minute drive, she told me the entire history of her grandfather, her life in France, the advantages of having an Indian servant, how her excellent Russian barred her from the hotels and restaurants for foreigners when she returned to Moscow. "Are you crazy", she would yell frequently at oncoming drivers who seemed bent on crashing into us. Cars drive on the left in India, but you couldn't tell from the streets of Delhi; cars were on the left, on the right, driving down the road or across it. We stopped near the gates of the Mango Garden. "You will stay here, God help you" she said, crossing herself. I sent her a post card recently, with only two words: "God helped". Passing a garden, I came to a large house with a veranda. A woman in Indian dress, with the red spot on her forehead, met me. "Are you from the American embassy? Come in, here is your room." I seemed to be in a boarding house for foreigners. Besides me, there were two young Spaniards from Vigo. I never found out why they were in India. A Canadian hippie with hair everywhere, one heavy silver earring, and his English girlfriend with an earring in her nose. A hopelessly stupid Australian, a sleepy Frenchman, Marcel, with his girlfriend hooked on drugs. The Spaniards, whispering, told me

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that her family owned a chain of hotels in Bombay and Calcutta, and that she was married to the Duke D'Orleans. I never found out if it was true, but you could tell, from her wrinkled and puffy face, that only a few years before she had been good looking. There were others, but I didn't talk to them. The first questions were always who was I and where was I from. "From China", I said. "Truthfully", asked an English woman. I thought Chinese lived in China. I improvised a story that I was from Harbin, where many Russians escaped after the Revolution. Recently, my relatives in France had discovered my existence, and now I was waiting for an entrance visa.

This last part had a grain of truth. My great-grandfather, Kupriyan Usachov, had been a Cossack general in the Tsar's army. He was executed by the Bolsheviks at the beginning of the Civil War for refusing to join the Red Army. Each of his sons immediately joined the White Army to fight against the Bolsheviks. After the defeat of the White Army, they emigrated to France. It is likely that I have relatives there, although I haven't been able to find them.

"You know what" exclaimed the owner of the house, pointing to an old man in a chair under a palm tree, "This is my father. He lived in Harbin in 1926, and still remembers everything." Fortunately, he was very old, and my English suddenly became very poor. He remained happy to meet his townsman, and only asked about a water tower near the bazaar. "It's there, grandpa. What would happen to it?" I assured him.

I finally hit on a method of answering questions about life in China; I simply described life in Russia. It sounded like the truth. The Spaniards gave me a magazine with an article about life in China. With his background, I was able to satisfy the curiosity of the English woman and the Duchess D'Orleans. Everyone believed me; only Marcel looked at me with a knowing wink, but he kept silent. The Canadian hippie told me that he was a businessman buying Indian fabric for clothes. I couldn't figure out when he conducted his business; he spent the entire day on the veranda banging his guitar, smoking, guzzling beer, and swearing at American imperialists. The Dutchman from the UN appeared occasionally, informing me that there was nothing new, and disappearing again. At one point, an unknown man handed me a sack of Indian rupees, took a photograph, and disappeared. That evening, I counted

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15,000 in notes, each with the hole for securing with iron bars used by Indian banks. I stayed in the house for ten days. Soon bored with the company, my only entertainment was the dinner, a disappointment in its vegetarian consistency.

Hindus don't eat meat; they eat each other. Where else could you observe a society shaped by centuries of apartheid? What use are laws against slavery when the people voluntarily serve as slaves? I have never seen such obedience as was reflected in the eyes of our ever-smiling cook, our laundry women, our gardener. The caste system has never been abolished, and won't be.

Finally, the Dutchman told me that on the following day an Afghan would take me to Nepal. I should give him the sack of rupees, and trust him as to what would come next. The next day, I said good-bye to my neighbors, and told them I was flying to France, to Dijon to stay with my grandmother's brother. "You will never return to China", the English woman asked? "Never". "Don't go to America, there are only capitalists there", advised the hippie. "By no means" I promised.

Towards evening, a motorcyclist came to the house. A heavy beard hid his age but he was probably no more than 25. Without any introduction, he said "My name is Shapur. Let's go." I mounted the seat behind him on the motorcycle. A few seconds later, we were rushing down the streets of New Delhi, swerving between cars and bicycles, ignoring pedestrians and sacred cows. We passed over a small bridge into old Delhi. "Ruskies get out of Afghanistan" I read on the side of a fence. A good beginning, I thought, thinking about the nationality of my driver. We wound along the dirty, narrow alleys for a long time. At last we stopped at a two-story house with a small courtyard. The house was empty, but soon another man joined us. Shapur introduced him as his cousin. I pulled all of the embassy's money from my pack, and gave it to him. "Wonderful" he applauded. "We are leaving in an hour. Meanwhile, look at his. How do you like it?" he said, handing me a little gray booklet. It was an Italian passport, in the name of Sebastian Fernandez from Milan. An Italian with a Spanish name?, I thought with surprise. But there was more to come. I found out that he was me! There was no doubt that the photo inside was of me. "Damn" swore Shapur. "It seems we forgot the signature of the Italian counsel here." He took a pen from the drawer, and

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practiced for a few minutes. Choosing the best of his efforts, he entered the signature of the consul beneath the stamp of the consulate in Bombay with a grand flourish. "What should I do with this", I asked, waving my "hammer and sickle"<sup>1</sup>. "Keep it for awhile, maybe you will need it later". Meanwhile, Shapur's cousin was counting the money. "15,000 rupees", he said. "Only 15,000!", Shapur jumped to his feet. "They promised 15,000 American dollars"<sup>2</sup>. What they discussed next I don't know; to my shame, I had not learned Pharsee. With rapt attention, I followed the expression on their faces, trying to get their words. With agitated gestures, they were trying to convince each other. Each would wave stacks of rupees in the other's face, running from corner to corner in the room, pointing in my direction. "\$15,000", I repeated to myself, "75,000 rubles at the black market rate on the streets; my salary for 35 years. Where could I get this kind of money? My freedom was going to be expensive, and I had no training in robbing banks."

Finally, they left together on the motorcycle, promising to return soon. I was sure that I wasn't going anywhere today. How long would I have to rot in India before making an escape? Only two weeks in India, but it seemed half of my life. "Who are those Afghans? What's on their mind? Can I trust them?" Shapur's countenance seemed that of a simple and honest fellow, but I didn't trust his cousin. His eyes were constantly shifting from side to side. His laughter seemed an act.

They returned an hour later, with a large kettle of hot pilaf. With real joy, I was treated to the forgotten smell of roast meat. We sat on the floor Muslim style, and started to eat. I don't believe in God because I prefer thinking to believing; it is better to be mistaken due to your own thoughts than to blindly follow someone else's. But if I hadn't a choice, I would prefer Islam to Hindu. Islam is easy to understand, and logical. It still retains something from 1001 nights. Later, in Pakistan, I experienced a strange feeling that, at last, I had joined people of my own kind. People who know what they are doing; what

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<sup>1</sup> Russian familiar term for the Soviet passport.

<sup>2</sup> One dollar was worth about 10 rupees.

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they are living for. How pleasant it was that no one was looking at me with the Hindu stare of a decadent artist. No one really understands Hinduism. Don't presume to claim that you do. Hinduism is not meant to be understood, but instead to be a mystery. If we drop the unnecessary details, the mystery becomes clear: it is nothing more than a feeling of people reduced from solid to liquid by the pervasive heat, listening to the teasing of the irregular melodies of the sitar, staring at the narcotic emptiness. This, and nothing more.

"It was all a misunderstanding", Shapur gestured expansively. "You will stay here - today; tomorrow you will return to the hotel." "But everything will be OK" his cousin offered. "We will straighten everything out in a couple of days." "We understand your feelings. Be patient." I wasn't disappointed. From the beginning, I was prepared for complications. But it was almost impossible to return to waiting again. I didn't want to go back to those disagreeable, lazy people in the hotel.

I put the money back in the pack. We didn't discuss my escape any further. Shapur told of his experiences fighting in Afghanistan. He showed the dark red scar under the edge of his shirt. It healed in a hospital in Iran. He worked in Pakistan, then came to India. His mother and sisters had been living in Canada for a few years, but he didn't want to go there while the Russians were still in Afghanistan: "Better to fight than to dance." "He wants to dance", Shapur pointed to his cousin, who shrank from his gaze. "In a month, I will be back in Afghanistan, with the partisans. I have to buy a machine gun. I want a Kalachnikov. I was wounded by one. It's a good gun. The other equipment is not cheap, either. So please forgive me for my concern about money." Taking a map of the country, he ran his finger along the mountain passes, showing me the location of the serious battles.

It all seemed very strange to me. An observer might have thought we were discussing last years' vacation, not one of the most severe wars of the decade which was in progress not far from us. I, only a few weeks previous, had come from the country of the hated enemy. Later, in Rome, I met some people from Akhmad Shakh Mosood's<sup>1</sup> organization. I was surprised by

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<sup>1</sup> One of the leading guerrilla fighters.

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their friendliness towards me. The youngest member of the group, realizing that I was Russian, pretended to shoot me with his fingers. The adults immediately silenced him. They told me that they were trying to adhere to the rules of war, but it was difficult considering the type of war. I remember an old woman who had lost all of her relatives in Kandahar. She didn't speak to me, but bowed politely.

I haven't mentioned the language difficulties. It might seem that all of our conversations were in the Queen's English. The Afghan's English was worse than mine; for three hours I talked to one who knew only "yes" and "no problem". With the help of gestures and drawings, he described his adventures in the Pyandzhshir valley near Kabul. It was spectacular to watch his demonstration of the launch of an anti-aircraft missile. They captured a few Soviet soldiers, but did not kill them, although it almost cost them their lives trying to lead their captives through the mountains. The youngster who had attempted the assassination with his fingers knew a little Russian. "Welcome dear comrades" he said as we parted. Shapur also was not completely ignorant of our great and powerful language<sup>1</sup>. When he was feeling relaxed, he repeated with great rapidity the Russian words for "How do you do? Fine. How do you do? Fine."

Shapur told me to make myself at home in the adjoining room, and to sleep on the couch under the huge portrait of actress Brooke Shields. He told me that several other men would be sleeping in the apartment as well, but that they would not harm me. I closed the door, and lay sleepless on the couch. Judging from the sounds in the next room, 15 guerrillas seemed to be preparing for the night. At worst, I would have time to climb on the roof, I thought, inspecting the locks on the windows. The Afghans would have a good excuse to cut my throat. These thoughts were not helpful in falling asleep. I was rich with Indian rupees; this would have seemed a fortune to people forced to sleep jammed together on the floor. I felt that I could trust Shapur; I was a guest in his house, which still meant something in the Orient. But I knew nothing about the others; they could be dangerous. Would Brooke Shields appreciate my bloody body prostrate beneath her picture, I wondered.

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<sup>1</sup> Turgenev's phrase.

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I probably didn't sleep at all that night. I remember only the unpleasantness of stepping over the snoring bodies to get outside to use the bathroom. One more day of life, I thought, watching the sunrise slowly filling the sky. "Good morning, good morning to everybody" cried the old men riding bicycles in the streets; the earliest risers in India. "Good morning" Shapur greeted me. We have to go. Your hotel host already knows that you are coming back." "How was Paris" asked Marcel at breakfast, aristocratically buttering his toast. "What is the problem" asked the Duchess of Orleans, staring at me with her opiated gaze. "Ah bureaucracy. They messed up everything, and I am to blame" I answered. "Bureaucracy" said the Englishwoman, shaking her nose ring, "we all know it; everything is slow, slow, slow." The next few days were probably the most unpleasant for me. I silently hated India, and everything Indian. I didn't hear anything, and had no idea what to think of my plight. Suffering from the heat, I wandered among the palms and mango trees trying to invent some fantastic method of escaping the country. I escaped from the Soviet Union, now it only remained to escape from the British colony which had transformed itself into a progressive, democratic state of India. How easy it would have been for me to deal with the colonial officials. Or to not deal with them at all; just to board a steamer in Bombay for any port in the world.

I have never collected postage stamps. How pleasant it is to look at old stamps from Belgian Congo, Portuguese Mozambique, French Guyana. Now the parliaments there are voting whether to eat only the minority leader, or all of the minority party with him. But they are democracies; there is no racism. Somehow I never heard about India from the protesters talking about South Africa. Why don't they see that the caste system is not a class separation of the rich from the poor, but a pure separation of many varieties of human races, from blue-eyed Aryans to Dravidian Negroes. But the Brahmins do not sweep the streets. The main question was: how to escape from this damned country.

The Dutchman appeared just in time, because I had started to investigate weak points in the Bangla Desh border on a map I had borrowed from Spaniards. (The Spaniards continued indifferently doing nothing). I'm still curious to know what

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brought them to India. The Dutchman brought another bag of money, a good sign. Soon, a taxi brought Shapur and his cousin. We locked ourselves in my room, drew the curtains, and started to count the money. I was told the new price: \$5,000 dollars, 2/3s in rupees, and rest in dollars. Because of the low value of rupees, the table was overflowing with bills. It's a pity that I couldn't photograph this scene from a Hollywood movie. In the weak light of the table lamp, with the money lit and our faces in shadow, the Dutchman was negotiating with the Afghans in Pharsee, moving stacks of bills from one corner of the table to another. Having counted it all, he asked Shapur to sign a piece of paper. I never found out what was written on the paper, but his document proved to be a stronger covenant than all the Helsinki agreements, although the signatories were not quite so prominent.

Within a minute, the three of us were in a taxi negotiating the streets of Delhi. The Dutchman had given me 400 rupees, and wished me good luck. I still don't know if he was a poet or not, but I feel he helped out of some attraction to my romantic adventure. It is pleasant, sometimes, after seeing a thousand phlegmatic, unimaginative people, to meet a man who is able to express candid emotions, a man whose actions are subject to some abstract, romantic ideals. I still don't understand how my escape from India was arranged, but I am sure the intervention of the Dutchman was necessary to its success.

Shapur's cousin was apparently not in a good mood; he had recently been bitten by the hotel keeper's dog. What this friendliest of dogs suspected in him I don't know. He apparently took me for a very important man, smiling at me and trying to converse through his pain. Without letting Shapur or the driver see, he discretely showed me his name, written on his palm, and asked me to remember it. We spent about 40 minutes traversing the streets of Delhi, stopping occasionally. At each stop, Shapur would disappear through some archway, and reappear almost immediately. At one stop, several men chased him as he ran to the taxi. His cousin forced me down on the seat, out of sight. Nothing happened, however, and we continued on towards the bus terminal.

Inside the terminal, the cousin desperately put his hand close to my face, furtively whispering "remember, remember". With a look of scorn, Shapur pretended not to see. Pulling out the roll

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of money from his clothes, he gave about a quarter of it to the cousin, and pushed him out the building towards the taxi.

On the map, Katmandu is not so far from Delhi. But in the orient, no one hurries. We were on the road 50 hours. I didn't sleep for three nights during the trip. I didn't want to sleep. I had never felt so energetic. The terrain offered one surprise after another. Each sight was like the prod of a needle. "Look, there are parrots, and monkeys jumping on the palms."

Accompanied by the incessant sounds of Hindu rock and roll coming from radios carried by nearly everyone, the bus slowly scratched its way through the crowded streets. The bus contained not only Indians and Nepalese, but about 10 Americans. From their conversations, I understood that they had been strangers to each other before boarding the bus. Afraid of creating a dangerous situation, I didn't talk to anyone on the bus.

Five kilometers outside the city, we stopped for no apparent reason, other than perhaps to enjoy the sunset. As we were standing outside the bus, some Indians approached with a very long-bearded dwarf in tow. They offered to let the passengers take a picture together with the dwarf for a fee. Others offered a very suspicious bubbling "milk shake" in dirty handmade wooden bowls. One American tried the drink, and without hesitation headed for the bushes. I naively asked Shapur where the toilet was located. He gave me a strange look and waved his hand in a circle, as if to say that everything in sight was a bathroom.

Back on the bus, Shapur and I were sitting in the driver's cabin, separated from the coach by a metal handbar. There was an American seated with us, but he was so involved in a book about yoga that he was almost invisible. Besides the two drivers, the crew of the bus included two very young men whose apparent duty was to pay the tolls and bridge crossings. I had never imagined that there were so many toll gates. At times, we stopped every five minutes. Often, the next toll gate was visible from the preceding one. Every payment was accompanied by extensive negotiations.

Obviously, Shapur had traveled this road before. In every roadside inn, he was well known as an old acquaintance. He spoke Hindu fluently. I don't know how well, but he seemed to

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have no difficulty making himself understood. One of the drivers, a huge, smiling, Hindu, was winking at me continually. Apparently, he knew that I was not a simple passenger. But I have no way of knowing how much he knew, or whether he was involved in our adventure.

I have forgotten the names of the towns we passed, and cannot trace now the route we followed. There is no need to recall this, because each town looked just like all the others. All Indian town and cities are the same; ant's nests made from garbage filled with tents, wooden hovels, crude shacks, and people and people and people. Our bus, like an icebreaker, pushed its way through the masses, literally pushing people aside as it progressed. Everyone on the street had something to sell, something to exchange through the window of the bus.

I was probably lucky to catch only hepatitis, avoiding the fatal, mysterious, oriental diseases; no one removed the sewage left to fester on the thresholds of the houses. I don't know why. Perhaps it was local custom; perhaps a religious law; perhaps a philosophy of life. Hinduism is a difficult way of life to understand. At the first opportunity, I would ask an orientologist why they don't keep themselves clean.

At the Indian border, the documents and suitcases of the Americans were searched in great detail several times, but no one checked mine even once. A few Nepalese, obviously known to Shapur, edged close to us in the crowded store, and took my Italian passport. It was returned to me stamped by the Indian guards. We headed for the Nepal border without a single Indian guard examining me.

At last, here was another magic line to cross; the border with Nepal. I constantly put on and removed the eye glasses, not knowing if the disguise was necessary. Ahead of the bus, Nepalese soldiers were searching a pony cart. Then our bus was passed through without stopping.

Farewell, India. Rejoice that I hadn't the money or the time to become your Marquise de Custine<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Astolphe de Custine was a French traveler in Russia in the early 1800's in the time of Tsar Nicholas I, whose book, published in 1839 on his return to Paris, accurately described

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So I entered Nepal illegally, with a falsified passport and no visa. "How do you do. Fine.", exclaimed Shapur in the only Russian words he knew. Without thinking, I answered him in Russian, then silenced myself immediately when I realized what I had done. The American with the yoga book suddenly raised his head, looking at me suspiciously.

300 meters beyond the border, our driver decided to stop for a few hours. Shapur proposed that we find a place to eat. Walking along the shops, we discovered a small restaurant in a ruined brick house which had lost its roof. Weeds were growing in the corners, and in the slit in the walls. Dogs slept under the tables; roosters roamed at will. A barefoot 14 year old came to serve us. "Give me this one, the one with black spots" said Shapur, pointing to one of the roosters. The boy grabbed a knife, and started chasing the rooster around the room, accompanied by the laughter of the customers. "Now we have to slaughter him according to Muslim rules", Shapur said, demonstrating with fingers drawn across his throat. "Hey boy, you're doing it wrong" he cried to the boy. "Give me the knife." With a quick grab, Shapur, caught the rooster by his neck and held him on the floor with his knee. 10 seconds later, the rooster was on his way to the kitchen.

Our Hindu driver joined us. Seeing me, he started laughing, but didn't explain why. Behind him followed the Nepalese who had taken my passport to be stamped. Sitting down at a corner of the table, the driver ordered whisky for everyone. "Do you have dollars? Sell them to me", he whispered to me. "No, I don't have dollars." "OK then, exchange your rupees for Nepalese money." I did, with some difficulty, because the Nepalese have not only their own alphabet, but their own numbers. With curiosity, I examined the bills with the portrait of King Birendrah I. I had never been in a true monarchy before. I believe in democracy, but not every nation deserves a republic. I would prefer the house of Romanov<sup>1</sup> to the circus with

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the terrible conditions of the time, and just as accurately predicted events to come in the next 150 years. He was universally hated by Russian nationalists at the time. Even the Soviets 100 years later maintained the ban on his book.

<sup>1</sup> The line of Russian tsars, from the 1600s until 1917.



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acrobats, clowns, and trained animals they have in Russia now. I would prefer Queen Victoria to the Indian dynasty of Nehru and Ghandi. "So rule for the glory of your state and the terror of your enemies"<sup>1</sup>, King Birendrah Bir Bikram Shakh Dev!

Three more people joined us, each buying whisky for everyone. We became noisy and recklessly happy. The rooster tasted wonderful. At first, Shapur refused to drink. But convinced by our reasoning that whisky is not wine, and that the Koran prohibits only wine, he ordered whisky for everyone.

"So you are from Italy" the man sitting next to me said, introducing himself as a local teacher. Of what, I don't remember, but it was not of Italian. "All my life I dreamed of visiting Italy". "Me too", I almost answered, without thinking. The teacher was talkative. Very soon, we were involved in a typical Russian drunken conversation<sup>2</sup>. Of course, the topic was politics. The teacher told me that his majesty was playing a complicated game, maneuvering between India and China, using one country to ensure Nepalese independence from the other.

At that time, terrorists were active in Europe, and the Americans were bombing Khaddafi. It was interesting to ask the teacher how they dealt with terrorists in Nepal. "I cannot guarantee the truthfulness of this story", he told me. I will sell it (to you, the reader) for what I paid<sup>3</sup>.

About 20 Palestinians came to Katmandu, having heard about a group of Israeli tourists traveling through Nepal. Someone reported their arrival, and most of the Palestinians were immediately arrested. But a few remained free, and managed somehow to find the Israelis, and to take them as hostages in the hotel. Probably, they thought things would happen as in Europe. Representatives of the government would arrive to beg them for mercy. Members of the press would come to shake their hands, interview them, and reveal the deep causes that

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<sup>1</sup> Line from the Russian hymn God Save the Tsar.

<sup>2</sup> Animated debate lasting until dawn, with one idea never fully started before the next one takes its place.

<sup>3</sup> Russian saying.

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had provoked them to act. But things happened somewhat differently. The king proclaimed that he would hang one captured terrorist each hour, and ordered that a scaffold be built in front of the hotel. The carpenters worked throughout the night with their saws and hammers. At dawn, seeing the well-built scaffold outside the windows, the terrorists immediately surrendered and joined their grateful comrades in prison. Such severity was somewhat explained by the recent bombings by local terrorists in Katmandu. The king especially had no use for imported terrorists.

When I entered Nepal, elections were in progress for the Parliament. Our bus was searched several times by soldiers armed with handguns and bamboo sticks. They were looking for explosives. Initially, I was indifferent to the searches, but eventually the look of concern on Shapur's face alarmed me lest they would catch me with the fictitious Italian passport in one pocket, and my Russian one in the other.

- What would happen if they detained us, I asked.

- I don't know. By the grace of Allah, they will miss us.

I gave Shapur the marine "Kitty Hawk" cap given me in the embassy so that he would look more western. We noticed that the Americans were almost never searched. I haven't explained that surrendering to the Nepal government was not my goal. I wanted to reach the American embassy in Katmandu. Nepal didn't have the friendship treaties with Russia that India did, so it would be much easier to negotiate with them. Even in Nepal, however, there were no guaranties; I couldn't feel save, and relax.

En route again, I waited in vain for the snowy mountains to appear. We didn't see them until we arrived at the capital. By no means is Nepal richer than India, but it is definitely cleaner, less crowded, and better kept. As I knew, nearby mountains exert a strong positive influence on people, making them strong, honest, honorable. In Katmandu, we rented a taxi. I chanted the magic phrase once again: "To the American embassy, please."

They searched us at the embassy. They let me in, but made Shapur wait outside. I never saw him again. I pray that the

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bullets of Tsarandoy<sup>1</sup> will miss him, and that he will live a long, healthy life. "Hey Shapur, hello from Shaoravi<sup>2</sup> American."

I spent about 10 days in the embassy. At first, my secret service bodyguard kept his finger on the trigger of his gun. By the second day, we relaxed. Those were unforgettable days of justified idleness. I had a house in the middle of a pine forest. I could lie on the couch, or walk in the park for hours. Again, I was in gastronomic paradise. Again, everyone brought me sacks filled with all types of food. Again, I investigated in detail the pictures and the advertising on the packages. "Relax, rest" they said to me, "you will be busy when you get to America," but I paid attention to the warning. I believed that life in America would be much easier than in Katmandu.

They gave me a short wave receiver. I luxuriated in the clearest reception of Voice of America I had ever heard. Soviet jamming apparently did not reach Nepal. Occasionally I found MAYAK<sup>3</sup>, the Soviet radio station broadcast from Moscow. My store of knowledge was increased by learning that the Gorky region had enjoyed a successful planting season. "God didn't grant them common sense" I dismissed the Soviet people.

A Dutchman, a friend of my Dutchman from Delhi, flew to Katmandu from Geneva. He became involved in the negotiations with the Nepalese, but they didn't want to hear about me. "Let him disappear, evaporate immediately" was their response. This was the very thing I needed to hear. They would put me on the first flight out of Katmandu, which would eventually get me to Rome, the clearinghouse for emigrants to America.

First, they told me I would fly to Thailand. There are flights from Bangkok to Europe. Well, let it be Thailand. Then they said Pakistan. Well, let it be Pakistan. I had only to wait until the paperwork was completed. I particularly needed an Italian visa to leave the country. But the world soccer championship

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<sup>1</sup> Afghani-Soviet secret police.

<sup>2</sup> "Soviet" in Afghani

<sup>3</sup> "lighthouse" in Russian

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was being held in Mexico then, and no Italian in the world seemed to be working, especially the diplomatic corps.

"The day 29th of Jesta month 2043 year of Bikram era". The Dutchman and I made our farewell trip around Katmandu before flying to Karachi. Several times we passed by the Soviet embassy. "How do you do. Fine" I cried in Russian, with my head out the window. We stopped for a few minutes near the Italian embassy to obtain the visa. In the entire building, there was only one Italian, short and fat, with a small lap dog on his knees. (It was strange to see. The American embassy reminded me of a surrounded military camp. Everyone was in a uniform, whispering into walkie-talkies. TV cameras guard every corner.) The fat Italian stamped my new passport, given to me by the International Red Cross. We left for the airport.

Our plane departed at noon, so we saw neither the sunrise nor the sunset above the Himalayas. I'm sure Olga Yevgenyevna would have excused me. But I saw the mountains, themselves. It was a spectacular view. The Dutchman shot five rolls of film, naming each peak.

I liked Karachi. It is a pity that I spent only 12 hours there. The Dutchman showed me the downtown by car, the residence of Zia al-Hauck. He took me to expensive restaurants. Obviously, this Dutchman was somewhat different from the first. He was infinitely content with himself, more so than anyone else I have met. I am content with myself, too, but everything has to be in moderation. I suspect that he imagined the entire world as a series of restaurants, hotels, capital airports, and tourist attractions. He probably thought that everyone was moved by his brilliance and intelligence. He probably thought that all of the women loved him eternally. The word "love" however, is a little too ancient for such a modern, European person. He showed me a photo of his house, with a view of Mont. Blanc. Fine. He showed me a picture of his antique car, with spoked wheels. Fine. He showed me a picture of his daughters. Fine girls, but they had very little on in the picture. I understand, of course, that this is considered some kind of fine art photography. But...

- Why did you harp on it, you Siberian country lout?

- This is Europe.

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- OK, I'll shut up.

The Dutchman kindly exchanged my Nepalese money for Swiss francs. He drove me to the airport. I boarded the Ho Chi Minh-Karachi-Paris flight. The Karachi airport was literally crawling with soldiers. Everyone was checked a few times before being allowed to board. Apparently these severe measures were insufficient. Two months later, Palestinians seized a plane at the airport, and held it until the Pakistani police stormed the plane. Why the attack, when no one had asked the advice of the Nepalese king? Oriental people are not supposed to be attacked. Their imaginations should be attacked. The tsarist general Skobelev who occupied and pacified middle Asia said "In the orient, you should shoot, not from the most accurate cannons, but from the loudest."

- Our flight Paris-Karachi-Ho Chi Minh..., the stewardess mistakenly began. The passengers don't care; they were all asleep. But I, breathing heavily, tried to follow the stars in the sky to determine which way we were headed. Two minutes later, she apologized for the mistake. I was still afraid that the plane, because of weather or a mechanical breakdown, would be forced to land in communist Rumania. It would be the funniest thing in my life to walk down the boarding stairs into the arms of the Viet Cong, or Ceausescu.

The airplane descended through the clouds on its approach to land. France, I thought with joy, seeing the land below.

In Orly, I exchanged my Swiss francs for French ones, and decided to go in search of some beer to kill time before my flight to Rome. But things worked out differently. I asked a respectable looking man in civilian clothes where to go to confirm my tickets. Instead of responding, he shoved his police identity card in my face, and brusquely ordered me to follow him. They spent about half an hour searching me. I still have no idea what they were looking for. Fortunately, I had left my Italian passport in Nepal; I was traveling with the one from the Red Cross.

Who is Sebastian Fernandez? they repeatedly asked, after finding the name on a piece of paper in my clothes. I had prepared the paper for Indian customs days earlier, hidden it in my clothes, and then forgotten about it.

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Back in Katmandu, the family of a diplomat had invited me to dinner. They played a video tape of Star Wars that night. To explain the plot, they had written down a list of characters. I had kept the list well hidden in the English-Russian dictionary they had presented to me that evening.

- Who are those people?! What do you have to do with them? the Frenchman demanded, pounding his finger on the list of participants of the first intergalaxian war.

- This is Star Wars, I answered candidly, sounding like a spy in some international espionage plot. Thoughts of Russian border guards interrogating me at the Black Sea came to mind. Are they truly this stupid, or are they just pretending?

Having disassembled my spray can of deodorant (my first step on the road to assimilation in America), they finally let me go.

They flight was about to depart. I hurriedly downed some beer, and looked at the first western newsstand I had seen. What stood out were the shelves of pornography. Yes, this Europe.

I flew first class from Paris to Rome. Sounds impressive, doesn't it? If I could have gathered my Russian friends one evening, and casually mentioned how I flew first class! In the daVinci airport, our plane taxied to the gate, and parked next to Aeroflot! Rapidly, without looking around, I hurried to customs. Who is this idiot standing at the exit holding a large sign with my real Russian name written on it? Is he crazy? Please hide it immediately.

I was met by a short, old, haggard Italian who spoke no English at all, not to mention Russian. Without any success, I tried to find out from him what would happen to me in Rome. He was talkative enough, but I couldn't understand anything except "mama mia". But I understood every word when we found his car hemmed in by other parked cars and he poured forth an avalanche of condemnations to the heavens. Southern Italian temper. Repeatedly driving forwards and backwards into the other cars, he eventually widened the space sufficiently for us to depart.

Italy, I thought. Sightseeing. We crossed the Tiber, passed the Coliseum, and stopped near a small hotel called "World". The old Italian escorted me inside, introduced me to a woman, and disappeared. "Mangiare" she said. "What?". "Mangiare,

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mangiare" she repeated about 15 times. Finally, she turned her hand back and forth near her mouth, signifying, in the international language of signs, "eat". I had noticed some posters on the wall in Polish. Socialist tourists, I thought, without pleasure. I have to keep away from them. "Mangiare" she repeated again, pointing down the staircase towards the basement. We entered the empty dining room; there was only a young man slowly cleaning tables.

Seeing me, he started to talk in Italian. "I don't understand", I answered in English. He asked "where are you from?". "From America", I answered. "Oh, you are from America. Wonderful" he exclaimed. "But from you accent, you were probably not born there." "Well, yes, I was born" I paused a second. "in Finland." "And me in Poland." "Is it true?" "Yes". "What are you doing here? Are you a tourist?" "No, I escaped from Poland." (What a coincidence. Just arrived, and I have already met a fellow escapee!) "Well, actually, I'm not from America. I escaped from Russia." The Pole was surprised, and immediately switched to Russian. "I learned it in school" he explained. He informed me that the World Hotel deserved its name; the occupants were refugees from about 15 countries: Poland, Rumania, Bulgaria, Iran, Afghanistan, Vietnam, and Ethiopia. I was the only Russian. About a month ago, there was one Tatar from Kazan<sup>1</sup>. He escaped from Jordan. Now he is in America. My spirits were depressed. I had spent the last month thinking I was a hero, unique in the world, but now I realized there were many like me. Literally everyone was trying to run from the Communists, no matter what the cost. They were given free education, but still they ran. They had free medicine, and they ran. They had guaranteed employment, and they ran faster.

I spent a few days in the hotel. The French francs became Italian liras. I was drinking the cheap Italian wine with Poles and Rumanians, but surprisingly, the wine didn't taste good. Everything tasted bad. This was greetings from India; my hepatitis was flourishing.

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<sup>1</sup> Capital of the Tatar region east of Moscow, west of the Ural mountains.

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I walked through half of Rome, visiting the Vatican, and sent postcards discussing the weather to my friends in Leningrad. Of course, the signature was an invention.

This was 1986, when only a few people were able to leave the country. The so-called glasnost and perestroika, which for me only make the prison a little nicer, were just beginning. I was convinced that my letters to friends and relatives would never be delivered, and that I would never again see anyone from my previous life. Now, in 1989, I see the streets of Manhattan flooded with Soviet visitors hunting for cheap VCRs and Rambo movies to sell on the street corners of Moscow for enormous profits. To me, this is like Neil Armstrong finding an empty bottle of Russian vodka as he steps onto the surface of the moon.



## Chapter 4.

In the evening of June 18, I arrived in New York. On the other side of the earth in Russia, it was June 19, my birthday. America was a nice birthday present. At customs, a smiling black official checked my documents and shook my hand. "Freedom", he said.

New York. I am undecided. What shall I mention? I could write too much about my impressions. Those who live there know it all themselves. Nothing could describe it adequately to others. I had heard so much about the city, but everything seemed different when I saw it for myself.

Events from then on I will describe in a nutshell.

I spent the first week in a an apartment run by a philanthropic agency. It was located in the ultra-Orthodox section of Brooklyn. My roommate was a Hungarian from Rumania, or a Rumanian from Hungary; it's difficult to tell. He had spent half a year in Vienna, so he knew a little German. I knew a little as well, mainly from watching Soviet movies about World War II, so we were able to converse.

I remember spending the first few days frightened of the strangely dressed people on the street. Who are those Uzbeks wearing the small Moslem national hats, I wondered. Why do their children have such long locks of hair? Why in this heat do they wear fur hats? Who are those 19th century Russian students from St. Petersburg? Walking down the street was difficult. On the one hand, you don't want to offend anyone, but, on the other, you cannot keep from smiling.

I understand that, in Biblical times, it was comfortable to dress yourself like that. Just put on your black three piece suit, your black hat, get on your camel, and you are free to wander the Sinai desert. But I'm sure that, in the 22nd century, they will come to synagogue wearing blue jeans and Miami Vice tee shirts, and consider it traditional, Biblical dress.

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After Brooklyn, I spent a month in famous Brighton Beach<sup>1</sup>, enjoying the suffocating July air, and my hepatitis. One beautiful morning, I discovered that my face had turned canary yellow. I was very weak, and couldn't eat anything. I forced myself to go to Manhattan to see the 100th anniversary fireworks. My alcoholic neighbor didn't work at all, spending the entire day at home, swearing loudly, drinking vodka, and playing Vysotsky and Alla Pugachova<sup>2</sup> as loudly as possible. This was the biggest shock of coming to America. I spent the last month risking my life to get here, and I find Pugachova blasting from every window! My other neighbor, an elderly woman, made a scene when I used her matches to light the gas stove. In the stores, I was incensed to see the same despicable clerks behind the counters as I had seen in Russia. They talked to each other in a disgusting Odessa jargon, full of sickly sweet, juvenile overtones. Instinctively, I turned my head from side to side expecting to see our group leader and Olga Yevgenyevna yelling simultaneously, "You will never go abroad again".

One minor experience told me more about America than the most detailed guide book could. I had purchased a container of salt. For 15 minutes, I tried to determine how to open it. I removed all of the labels on the side, without success. I twisted the top. I tried to cut it with a knife. I finally found the miraculous pour spout. A special device to make life easier or more convenient??? This was impossible in Russia.

In August, the agency moved me to an apartment in the Puerto Rican section of upper Manhattan. Ever since, I have hated ice cream. Every night, in front of our window, the ice cream truck stopped, inviting customers with cheerful, trite music. I heard the melodies every night, all through the night; it never changed. Every day I escaped the Puerto Ricans, going to Ft. Lee to spend the day sitting on the benches.

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<sup>1</sup> Community of Soviet Jewish emigrants in New York, economically flourishing. Russian spoken exclusively.

<sup>2</sup> Crude, banal singers, very popular in Russia (and Brighton Beach). Vysotsky is a talented poet, whose lyrics are based on the alcoholic culture of Russia. Pugachova is a pale imitator of Western rock.

## **D. Sokolenko - How I Escaped from the USSR**

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Finally, I asked the agency to find me a job of any kind, as long as it was outside New York City. They knew of Mr. Spencer, the former advisor to the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, who offered me a job picking apples with Jamaicans at Bishop's Orchard in Connecticut. I accepted with gratitude.

The day before leaving New York, I crossed the George Washington bridge towards Ft. Lee for the last time. (My landlord, an old Estonian woman, was sure that the first American president was named George Washington Bridge.) I was in no hurry, and frequently stopped to look at the river. Two barges were below me, heading in opposite directions. It had rained recently, and Manhattan was clearly visible through the cleansed air. I was alone. Cars, with terrifying speed, flashed by. Suddenly, all the traffic stopped. The whole bridge was instantly filled with thousands of cars of unknown design and coloring. Strangers were smiling at me and waving. Suddenly, I understood. It struck me that it was over. I won. I was in America.

I never was a citizen of the Soviet state, because the state does not offer citizenship to any of its prisoners. I am not an American citizen yet. I always considered myself a citizen of the universe, following the ideas of Joseph Flavius<sup>1</sup> and Anacharsis Klotz<sup>2</sup>. This citizenship is available to anyone who wants it. The initiation rite is simple; just beat your breast and in a loud voice proclaim:

**I AM A CITIZEN OF THE UNIVERSE!**

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<sup>1</sup> A Jewish historian, favorite of the Roman emperor Vespasian in the first century, who favored a universal state, rather than one based on narrow religious principles.

<sup>2</sup> A German who joined the French revolution, proclaiming himself in fiery oratory a "citizen of the universe".

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