

“My Personal Campaign against Communism”

(from *Autobioscenes & Necrographies*)

by Norman Weeks

I shouldn't have brought a copy of *Animal Farm* into the Soviet Union; I knew that even at the time. I had intended to read the book back in Rome in preparation for our student group tour of the Communist countries of Eastern Europe, but I was too busy with my coursework to get around to it. So I brought the book with me, as Karl and I hitchhiked through Italy, took the boat to Greece, toured Athens, then travelled by train up through Yugoslavia to Vienna, the embarkation point for the group tour.

There I was in Moscow, passport in hand, waiting in line for admission into the country. *Animal Farm* was stashed in my back pants pocket. It was for my own reading, not for the dissemination of subversive anti-Soviet propaganda within Russia itself, I was ready to tell them. If they frisked me and found it, what would happen to me? 1966, Stalin was long gone; even Khrushchev, who had threatened to *bury* us, was off the scene. Kosygin and Brezhnev seemed like anybody's uncles; surely the system was moderating.

I passed through and entered the Soviet Union without incident.

There was little individual tourism in Russia at the time; our Rome Center university contingent was one of the early group tours. My political science professor, who had done so much to arrange the tour, could not himself participate. He was a Lithuanian who had fled the Russian occupation of his country; he could not let himself back into Soviet clutches.

Our student group in Moscow was closely guided. We were conducted to an exhibit demonstrating the successful assimilation of the many ethnic groups into the Soviet socialist utopia. We met with some Young Pioneers (Communist boy scouts). We were privileged with choice seats for *Swan Lake* at the Bolshoi. In short, they did everything propagandistically possible to give us impressionable young Americans a favorable experience of the Soviet system.

Some realities worked against their efforts. We were booked into what was supposed to be a first-class hotel. Each small room contained two three-tiered

bunk beds, first-class accommodations for the tourists. Then there was the gruel that passed for soup.

“I’m damn near broke,” Karl said to me. “What about you?”

“Same thing. It would be nice to have a little cash to spend on some souvenirs.”

Our tour was fully prepaid, but Karl and I had both spent our pocket cash on the expenses of getting from Rome to Vienna. Because we arrived in Vienna just before Easter, lodging there was scarce. We found a hotel next door to the building where Mozart had written *The Marriage of Figaro*. Even though we slept in a converted bathroom, a board-and-mattress over a tub for one and a cot next to the toilet for the other, we had to pay dearly for it. There were no ATMs in those days. The only way Karl and I could get some quick spending money would be to borrow cash from our classmates.

Karl came up with a better way.

“You know,” he said to me, “I read somewhere that the Russians are crazy for Levis. They’ll pay anything for them. Do you have any Levis with you?”

“Blue jeans? Now, why would I have brought blue jeans with me to Rome? Blue jeans are for the barnyard. If a city boy like me wears them, it is only for painting or some other messy, dirty kind of work.”

“You’re behind on fashion. Anyway, it seems that the Soviet Union doesn’t know how to make good clothes. What have you got that’s fairly new?”

“Some Van Heusen dress shirts. Why?”

“Maybe we can raise a little cash by selling some clothes.”

Karl went around to other students in our group, soliciting whatever clothing they could spare. (He approached the men only; he must have been squeamish about dealing in ladies wear.) He succeeded in collecting some Levis, as well as jackets, shirts, sweaters, and a Loyola University sweatshirt. (I visualized some young Russian walking around propagandizing on behalf of Jesuitism.)

Karl’s deal with our classmates was that he’d give them the full price of what they had paid for the article of clothing new (in rubles, of course, at a fair, not at the official exchange rate); anything over and above was to be ours. Karl

and I dug into our own suitcases for what we could spare; we'd make more off our own things, of course.

"Where do you propose setting up our little black market shop?" I asked Karl. "Is there a Moscow flea market?"

"Red Square. It's only four blocks from here."

"Red Square!"

"Sure, there are always people there."

Karl and I gathered up the bundles of clothes and headed out.

Our tour group was spied upon, our movements conspicuously monitored, by two men in trench coats who haunted the hotel lobby. We walked boldly past them and on our way.

Karl and I soon drew a crowd around us in a corner of Red Square. Karl was right about the Levis. We demanded exorbitant prices for them and for all our goods. Corrupted by Communism, the Russians were inept at haggling. We sold every last piece of clothing. It took Karl and me less than a half-hour to empty the Muscovites' pockets and fill our own.

As we were walking away, two policemen approached and called out to us.

Dead-to-rights! Currency controls were strict. In one of my pockets I had a slip of paper indicating how much--how little--cash I had brought into the country. My other pockets were now stuffed with multiples of that amount. The evidence was damning.

"Keep walking," Karl told me.

"Karl then turned, greeted the policemen in English, gave them a wave, and hurried me forward. The policemen hesitated in their pursuit.

"Probably just municipal cops," Karl said. "They don't want to get mixed up in a possible international incident."

As we were hurrying off, an old van pulled up at our side. The back door flew open.

"*Amerikanski!* Americans!" a young man called from inside the van. (I presumed he recognized us by how well-clothed we were.) "Come, come!"

Still in flight from the police, Karl and I jumped into the van on impulse. The door slammed shut, and the van bumped along over the pavement.

“You guys on the lam?” the young man in the back of the van asked. “Dirty coppers, I want to rub them out! You lay low with us. We have hideout.”

“What’s your name?” I asked the young man.

“Nicholas is my moniker. Nicky, my alias.”

“Where did you learn English?” I asked Nicky.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a squat, thick paperback. Its title was *G-Men in Action*, the illustration on the cover a man in pinstripes firing a tommy-gun. RAT-A-TAT-TAT!, the tommy-gun said. The inside of the paperback was like a comic book, all cartoons and underworld dialogue. The book was crudely printed in the 1930s, where and by whom I could not determine.

I introduced myself and Karl.

“Where you from?” Nicky asked me.

“Chicago.”

“Chicago!” Nicky’s eyes widened in delight and awe. “Al Capone! Gangsters! Bootlegging! G-Men! J. Edgar Hoover!”

Now, J. Edgar Hoover was a name, like George Orwell, that should never be pronounced in the Soviet Union. Nicky must not have known that Hoover, after coming to the conclusion that there was no such thing as organized crime in the United States, turned his zeal against Communism. In high school, I had read Hoover’s *Masters of Deceit*, warning of a Commie under every American bed. And the Communists, Hoover insisted, were super-intelligent and diabolically cunning.

“You from Chicago too?” Nicky asked Karl.

“No. Wisconsin.”

“You have gangsters in Wisconsin?”

“No. Just farmers and beer drinkers. But if a gangster wants a nice summer cottage for his vacation from killing, we’ll rent him one.”

Nicky gave a blank look, not understanding the wit of Karl's cultural characterization.

The van had stopped, as the driver conferred with Nicky in Russian, seemingly on where we should all go. I heard the English word, *party*. I presumed the word was meant in the festive, rather than the political, sense.

As the discussion between the driver and Nicky went on, I looked out the van window. I spotted Franny and Alicia Ann, two of our Rome Center classmates, on a corner, looking about aimlessly.

"Wait!" I called out to the driver.

I threw open the van door and called the girls over to us. The look of surprise on their faces was similar to what they might have shown had the embalmed Lenin we saw in the Kremlin that morning risen up in his coffin.

"Karl and I are getting to know the locals," I told Franny and Alicia Ann, as I drew them into the van.

"Your dame?" Nicky asked, pointing to Franny, who had taken a seat close to me.

"Yeah, my moll," I answered.

In a few minutes, we arrived at a drab and shabby two-room apartment full of young people. When word went around that Americans were now in attendance, excitement ran through the room.

Everyone was drinking vodka straight, out of juice glasses. Vodka straight. Not for the enjoyment of drinking, but as the means to quick obliviousness.

We four Americans mingled with the crowd and were bombarded with questions.

I broke out of the cluster and entered into broken conversation with a skinny, pale girl already half-drunk.

"My name Irina," she told me. "Irina not Russian name. Irina Greek. It mean *peace*. I am Peace. I want peace with *Amerikanski*."

"Me too," I agreed. "I'm here on a mission of peace."

By now, I had had a quantity of the vodka myself.

“You know,” Irina continued, “I never did kiss a capitalist.”

I took that as a flirtation and an invitation, so I kissed the pale face of Irina full on the lips.

I waited for her reaction.

She stared wide at me.

“Didn’t you ever hear that a capitalist takes what he wants?” I asked her.

“Oh!” Irina screamed out in delight. “I love you! You good! You kiss good! Marry with me. Take me to America!”

She threw her thin arms around me and pressed my face with vodka kisses.

Franny intervened and drew me away. Irina sank into the chair with a look of drunken bliss.

I next got into conversation with Dmitri.

“I love jazz,” he told me. “Duke Ellington. Ella Fitzgerald. Count Basie. Gerry Mulligan. You like jazz?”

“Not that much,” I answered. “I like classical music, you know, like Tchaikovsky.”

“Jazz is against law in Soviet Union,” Dmitri informed me.

A little later in our chat, Dmitri said, “I have icon. You like icons?”

I had taken a course in Russian history the year before and had, in fact, become interested in icons. An icon is a religious image painted on wood and covered over with a sheet of hammered silver or gold. Openings are left in the precious metal for the faces and hands of the figures--Madonna and Child, for example--to show through. An icon is a sumptuous artifact of Orthodox ecclesiastical idolatry.

Do you have the icon with you?” I asked Dmitri.

Franny laughed.

“What are you laughing at?”

“You! ‘Do you have the icon with you?’ You sound like some player in a spy movie.”

“What do you expect me to say?” I asked Franny, irritated. “He told me he had an icon. I’d like to see it.”

“But you whispered it, like in a conspiracy,” Franny persisted.

I began to wish I had not picked up Franny in the street.

Dmitri brought out the icon from the back room. The icon was small, but very well done. The Queen of the Universe crowned, with her Son in her arms. A beautifully crafted work of art.

“Maybe it’s a fake,” Franny said, her hand muffling her words. She thought that we were being set up to be cheated.

“You like it?” Dmitri asked me.

“Very much.”

“You know, I don’t believe in God. We in Russia don’t believe in God. The icon mean nothing to me.”

Dmitri’s face brightened with an idea.

“I give you the icon,” he said to me.

“What?!”

“You promise to send me six jazz records. I give you my name and address. Six jazz records, new ones, please. You promise, and I give you the icon.”

Now Franny seemed to think that it would be Dmitri who would be getting the short end of the deal. She told me that it was wrong to take advantage of a person who did not know the true comparative value of things. I then argued that what is valued varies from person to person. To Dmitri, six jazz records was worth one icon. To me, that icon was certainly worth the cost of six jazz records. I was ready to make a deal.

Franny and I now got into a discussion, as Dmitri stood by. Franny’s ethical argument fell on deaf ears, but then she brought up one objection that killed the deal. How could I get the icon out of Russia? Even in godless Russia, an icon was a national art treasure. Didn’t I hear about that Finnish sailor who had stolen a statue of a Russian bear from a Moscow square? He wound up in

Siberia. But I was buying, not stealing, I rebutted. Even if I got the icon out of Russia, Franny countered, what about the Customs in Italy, the Customs back in the States? I had no bill-of-sale, no export license, no documentation. The icon would cause me trouble.

I was still a bit shaky from Karl's and my near-miss with the policemen in Red Square. Maybe I'd better not push my luck with more reckless capitalist behavior in the Soviet Union. I told Dmitri that I had to decline his offer with regret.

Could I please send him a jazz record, anyway? Dmitri pleaded. "Just one, please." He wrote his name and address on a piece of paper and pushed it into my pocket. Sure, I'd send him a record, I promised.

I got out of Russia safely, escaped Communism, returned to the anarchic democracy of Italy, then, eventually, back to my own land-of-the-free-and-home-of-the-brave.

I never sent Dmitri a jazz record. A deal is an exchange, but I had gotten nothing from Dmitri. No icon, no jazz records,--that's the way capitalism works.

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