

Chapter One

Leningrad

The propellers spun quickly, keeping time for the beating of anxious hearts, many of which had begun their rhythmical work *after* jet aircraft were already in use. The old airplane taxied down the runway, accelerated, and lifted itself into its familiar abode—one in which it had been traveling for decades.

The spirit of relief was tangible inside the Polish Airlines flight from Paris to Leningrad (via Warsaw, of course). Propeller planes were supposed to exist only in museums, somewhat like the pterodactyls, but here we were, above the clouds, seated in this antediluvian metal contraption. Of course, this vibrating air vehicle had been good enough for our parents, and unknown to our great-grandparents, but we—well, we were spoiled.

In time, as we would discover on a grander scale in Russia, we got used to our surroundings. I soon settled into my normal flight routine, which is to use the time to rest. Retreating from the present, my mind began to wander through the impressions of the last four days.

I had arrived in Paris, with eleven other American students, on June 11, 1973, as part of the advance guard of 163 Americans on their way to study in Russia for the summer. Dartmouth, Georgetown, the University of Kansas, Michigan State University and the University of Washington jointly sponsored this program every summer, and I had had the good fortune to be accepted by the Dartmouth contingent.

I say good fortune because my main qualification was that I was a Dartmouth student. Students from all over the country

applied, but not a single one was able to bump any of the 13 Dartmouth students out of our group. Our professors said it was because we had all done so well on the qualifying exam. I know myself too well. It makes me doubt their statement.

Of course, our group *was* well-composed. I think our professors were very clever in their method of acceptance, as they obviously didn't go by grades alone. Dartmouth had only recently gone co-educational, so of the 13 Dartmouth students, only Nancy was female. Yet, when the 31 of us were finally all together, in the American Center for Students and Artists in Paris, it was discovered that there were 16 boys and 15 girls—well-balanced, for the laws of chance.

I questioned our leader, Professor George Young, about the propriety of such discrimination, and he explained. “We set other qualifications which occasionally carried more weight than the score of the qualifying exam.”

“But what could have weighted it so heavily in favor of the girls?” I asked.

George smiled, breaking through the official rhetoric, and said quietly, “it might have been the fact that they had to be female.”

There still is some wisdom left in this world, I thought. Discrimination has been in the doghouse ever since someone mixed it up with racial hatred. Since then it has been called the villain of sexual hatred, of religious hatred—of every form of hatred which gets any publicity. Yet discrimination is a faculty of the intellect, not of the heart. Hatred cannot be legislated away, but discrimination can. And our government is doing its best to do so.

Some day, perhaps not so far away, it may become illegal to discriminate on the basis of race, creed, sex, intelligence or ability. Then the private schools will really be in trouble. It would be unfair for them to deny a student admission because he is stupid.

Of course, the same would be true of business promotions, hirings and firings. Chaos would reign—which is precisely what would happen if discrimination is lost. It is the intellect which brings order to the differences, but it must be able to recognize

differences—differences like race, creed, sex, and so on—in order to do its job.

Hatred is another thing completely. Discrimination we need. Hatred we could do without—if we were angels.

But—I wander.

There was one girl on that early flight who will always retain a niche in my memory. Since I had been in Paris once before, and knew by experience that the Metro was just a Frenchified subway, I became the unofficial organizer of our trip to the American Student Center. I had packed light, having once undergone great suffering lugging a 45-pound suitcase around Paris. This time, my backpack and small suitcase made it easy for me to make the trip across town, but it also gave me no excuse—which brings me back to that girl.

Kitty was 19, with large, trained eyes which could look helpless on command. Her long, reddish-brown hair enhanced the beauty of her lightly-freckled face, but her eyes captured most of your attention. They were feline through and through.

We got off the bus from the airport at the Metro station, and started walking through the long corridors which lead to the trains. Eleven of us together, and one straggling behind. It was Kitty. She was struggling with one enormous green suitcase, which weighed nearly a hundred pounds. It was on rollers, but it was still too much. When I happened to turn around, her eyes attacked me. “I am suffering unspeakable horrors,” they said, “wouldn’t you just love to relieve a poor, frightened, helpless, innocent girl from her distress?”

I must confess my first reaction was “No”. I was too comfortable, having packed wisely, and I didn’t want to repeat the horrors I had undergone eight months earlier. But my heart could not bear the burden as easily as my muscles could, so I offered her my services. She quickly accepted, left me her suitcase, and pranced up to join the other girls’ conversation. When we had finally arrived at the Center, a backbreaking hour later, she noticed me again, retrieved her suitcase, and almost offered me a dime tip.

Fortunately, Kitty was associated with one of the other schools. She did not always have me to turn her eyes loose upon. But, by the end of the summer, I saw her professor carrying that suitcase. Next time she travels Kitty ought to pack light—to give her eyes a rest.

As I was shelving Kitty back in her niche, the clouds opened, revealing the countryside around Warsaw. As we were already close to the city, we caught a glimpse of the Palace of Culture and Science sticking its Stalin Gothic head out over the once beautiful skyline. That is all we ever did see of Warsaw, except for the inside of its airport, as we left right after refueling.

We ascended once again, the farmland below us stretching for miles in every direction. We saw a few old country estates, resting amid ancient shade trees, but not for long. We quickly reentered the world of clouds, and my mind slowly drifted back to Paris.

I was now seated in the auditorium of the American Center for Students and Artists, relistening to our orientation lectures. Two days in Paris had been absorbed by the process, but the only thing I found worth remembering was the introductory speech by the Director of the whole program, Professor Andy Morris. He had been sitting nervously center stage for an hour, while someone else handled the organizational details. His face was very active. The excitement of being in front of 163 students, combined with the message he had to deliver, were nearly too much for him. When it was finally his turn, he rose stiffly, walked to the microphone, coughed nervously while the students applauded, and then began to speak.

“Your dorm rooms will be bugged, your classrooms will be bugged, your tour buses will be bugged,” he warned us, his eyebrows gesticulating in time to his bowtie’s twitches. “Assume that you are always being watched, always being listened to. Trespasses of the law are dealt with heavily. Leave everything behind—and I mean *everything*—which could get you into trouble.

“You will be approached by comrades who will want to buy your blue jeans, your records and your books. Don’t sell anything!

Assume that every black market offer comes from a KGB agent attempting to deceive you—”

Professor Morris talked on and on in this vein, and it was bloodcurdling to most, producing the desired effect. While in Russia, most of the students were afraid to make Russian friends—at least for the first few weeks. By the fourth week, most had relaxed, but Morris’s speeches had slowed them down.

I, however, had doubted his claims. They just didn’t make sense, and having been there, I find it even harder to believe—mainly because the Russians have better things to do than to sit around all day listening in at the other ends of all those bugs.

Perhaps they listened to a few of us on a few occasions, but if they did, I feel sorry for them. Being on the other end of an eavesdropping bug must be extraordinarily boring. If every place in Russia is bugged, everyone there must go to work every day just to sit and listen in on the other ends. Even our own intelligence agencies complain that they receive too much information to digest. It is often more reasonable just to trust everyone. One would probably spend much less money making up for a few dishonest actions than one would spend to police the whole affair. But then, I’m not sure that the Russians are reasonable. I did notice, while I was there, that they were human, and this fact gives me cause to doubt.

Nevertheless, I was slightly afraid as our plane began to descend. Not about what Professor Morris had said, nor about the plane’s ability to land safely, but about the only Russian rule. We had pledged to speak only Russian while we were in Russia, and remembering this was definitely disconcerting me. I had balked when asked to sign the pledge, but it was pointed out to me that it wouldn’t be as stringent as it sounded. I had hoped not. I could speak Russian about as well as a first grader, and I knew my mind would suffocate if it had to confine all its utterings to such a level. Just in case, however, I was preparing for eight weeks of silence when we landed at Leningrad’s airport, whose features provided me with my first Russian surprise.

I was expecting an airport similar to O'Hare, as Leningrad has 4,000,000 citizens, and as Aeroflot, the Russian airline, is the largest in the world, carrying more than 100,000,000 passengers every year. I was more than mildly surprised to discover that Leningrad's airport (at least the one we landed at—I don't know of any other) did not even compare favorably with Bangor, Maine's.

We descended from the plane and walked into the terminal, which was either gray, or dirty-white, and completely devoid of any aesthetic value. It was larger than its second cousins, military guardhouses, but in all other respects the family resemblance was obvious.

We picked out our luggage and then proceeded through customs, which involved a detailed search for contraband goods. The titles of all books were checked, and the amount of currency one possessed was duly noted. The procedures were perfectly in line for a country whose economic life makes even a highly outlawed black market prosperous business.

When we had passed through customs, we boarded an old bus, piling our extra luggage on the back seats, and quietly (for everyone had been subdued by the bleakness of the airport) waited to be taken to our new home—Dormitory #4.

Our guide during our stay in Leningrad boarded the bus just before we left, and she provided our first glimpse of Russian beauty.

Ludmilla, or Ludya, as we knew her, was dressed simply, but prettily. Her face was fresh, full of life. And we discovered, soon enough, that she enjoyed being teased about almost anything—except the Communist Party. Then her face would behave as all human faces do whose souls have emotional investments in vulnerable organizations—and that includes every organization on the planet. She would mentally wince whenever an imperfection was held up to ridicule. However clearly her mind might recognize the comment as being accurate, she would always assume a very defensive position (we soon discovered that she was very touchy on this subject and, after a comment or two had spoiled one of her many good moods, we let the subject drop).

Ludya, with her fresh, wholesome beauty, and funny, girlish laugh, soon won our friendship. She, and the other four guides, were all Chairmen of their local Communist Youth Clubs, which is somewhat analogous to being an Eagle Scout in America. They were also all bright students. Ludya took her finals shortly after we arrived, and she complained about how hard they were, both before and after taking them. Olga, the guide for Georgetown's group, and a very fancy dresser (always one of four outfits) for a Soviet student, overheard Ludya complaining to us once, and laughed. She claimed that Ludya was a *brain*, and would probably do better than anyone else on those tests. We discovered later that that was precisely the case.

Ludya had given us a short welcome as the bus lurched away from the airport, and then had intelligently sat down so that she would remain in one piece.

Along the road to Leningrad there was little development at first, but after we sped under an overpass, on which was hung a bright red banner proclaiming "Long Life to the Communist Party", we could see the low outlines of the city ahead. We passed several large industrial centers before coming to the monotonous gray apartment buildings which surround the older sections of the city.

The sky was overcast, which contributed greatly to the somberness of our first impressions of Leningrad. Nothing seemed beautiful at all until we crossed a bridge and glimpsed the Rostralnaya Columns, designed by an Italian architect (as were many of Leningrad's palaces), dimly through the fog. These columns stand at the end of Vasilevsky Island, on Pushkin's Square (which is semi-circular), and served, in bygone times, as lighthouses.

As I watched those columns through the gray gloom rising above the Neva, I began to have a sense of Leningrad's beauty, sepulchral though the scene was. The Neva is lined with palaces, or palace-like buildings, and each is painted a different bright color. However, most have recently been neglected, and the sense of a greatness that was, but is no longer, was tangibly seen when the palaces were shrouded with the Neva's mourning. In the bright

sunlight the palaces were still beautiful, though their old coats did speak of better days. In the lingering twilight (for there was no night to speak of while we were in Leningrad), adorned with man-made stars, these palaces were compassionately restored to their former beauty. But, on our first glimpse of them, in the gloom of a foggy June evening, they seemed not only to belong to the past, but to still be there, peopled by the shadows of their lusty aristocrats.

This scene did nothing to cheer me as we neared our destination. I was still silent, not having had anything (in Russian) to say, except for a few words of explanation to the customs officer who had inspected my possessions. Our dormitory was located in the middle of Vasilevsky Island, about 1 ½ miles from the University (which is near those Italian columns), but when we stopped in front of it, we thought that some mistake had been made. It didn't look like a dormitory to us. It looked more like a cross between a prison and a slum dwelling. Gray was its color, if you can call gray a color, and it was already quite old. It had been built in the thirties, and the fear of those years, somewhat deadened by time, seemed still present in the unattractiveness of our new home.

We unloaded the bus, went up to the second floor (the third floor according to the American system), and received our room key from the floor's *dezhurnaya*. Usually the key-keeper is one of the millions of grandmothers, or *babushkas*, who perform many indispensable services for the Soviet State. But ours, on certain shifts, was a middle-aged man, who must have doubled as our janitor.

Peter, Dave, Dan and I found our room and opened the door, prepared for anything. We had been warned by last year's students that our room would be cozy, in the sense of small, but it is hard for the human imagination to grasp anything too remote from its direct experience.

Ours hadn't, in this case, counted on small to mean tiny. The room proper was about twelve feet by ten feet. Just inside the door were two small closets, giving an extra two feet of length to the room, but no extra width (sort of like an extended doorway). In

this enormous room the four of us were to live for six weeks. My decision to room with non-smokers proved far more important than I could have imagined. There is no place to escape to in an oversized broom closet.

Our beds lined both walls with their small forms. The metal frame of each was strung with chicken-wire, covered by a two-inch-thick foam mattress. These cots were less than six feet long, and about two-and-a-half feet wide. This proved fortunate, as it made for more space between one side of the room and the other.

Dave and Dan, who slept on the other side of the room, shared the common comfort of beds which sagged in the middle as effectively as hammocks, but they missed most of the fun which Peter and I had because they were shorter than the beds were. Peter is 6'3" tall and I am 6'2". If you have been keeping track of the statistics, then you know that that makes us five inches longer than our room was. We agreed to sleep feet to feet, hanging over the beds from the ankle down. It worked fairly well, as I let my feet hang over both edges of the bed, while Peter kept his hanging out from the middle. We only woke up with our feet tangled together on a few occasions, so it proved itself a decent arrangement.

However, our first difficulty upon entering the room was how to communicate with each other. We were well-equipped to hail a taxi, or to ask directions to the Hermitage, but we weren't quite prepared to discuss the necessary matters concerned with the process of four young men moving into a broom closet together.

For the sake of simplicity, I shall translate our attempts.

"Who will sleep—on this—ship?" Dave bravely tried.

Peter laughed, as he understood, but I had missed two of the words, and so I replied.

"Well—I would like—to be—well—on a ship," I said, wishing to be anywhere else.

Peter laughed again. He derived a lot of pleasure from our ignorance that summer.

"Who wants to sleep—in this bed?" Peter then asked, with only one short pause. We suspected him of practicing that line on the bus.

“I will,” Dave quickly answered, leaving himself free from further conversational necessities.

“Me here,” Dan said, claiming the bed next to Dave’s. Peter then sat down on the third bed, so I was given mine without the embarrassment of having to say anything.

For a long time silence reigned in our room. Dan and Dave began to read, Peter went out into the hall, and I looked out our shadeless window onto the courtyard—which is a pretty fancy word for what I was looking at.

Finally Dan, good-natured soul that he is, asked absentmindedly, “does anyone want any Tang?”

There was a short gasp, followed by laughter, and then we all started speaking in English. Impressions of our trip, the humorous things that had happened at customs, Ludy’s giggle—we let all these things escape from their prison. Peter came back in while we were talking, and he made us agree that we wouldn’t use English outside the room (which only lasted another day or two), but inside we were able to find great comfort in our mother tongue.

We needed that comfort, as our dormitory provided little in that line. On our floor, 163 Americans and our five Russian guides lived in 42 rooms, all similar to our own. The building was U-shaped, and at the end of one wing was the women’s washroom (16 sinks), across from which was their bathroom (4 toilets). At the end of the other wing, miles away, were the men’s washroom and bathroom. The sinks always worked (cold water only), but the other facilities had passed their prime.

In the basement, serving five floors of customers (or 850 people when full), were two shower rooms, each containing about 15 showers. During the six weeks we lived there, the hot water worked on only two occasions. Perhaps that is why I never found the showers crowded.

Another room in the basement served as the laundry facility. There was one electric washer, of the old wringer variety, but it never seemed to perform. What did prove useful, however, were the large tubs, complete with scrub board, bar of soap, and cold

water only, which kept our clothes so clean we could see right through them by the end of the summer.

The dormitory was also provided with a large meeting room, with slightly cushioned chairs which could be pushed, row by row, to the side. A piano sat on the stage, and an old, but functioning, phonograph was hidden in the back corner. A local election was held the day after we arrived, with the balloting taking place in our meeting room. It obviously served many purposes, but I think we added a few extra before the summer was through. It made our dormitory more livable. Perhaps the Soviets, through Sputnik, their Youth Travel Organization, had seen to our comfort by installing us on the only floor in the vicinity loaded with such a luxury.

The evening hours after we arrived in our new home seemed to drag very slowly, but they actually hadn't. It was quite late before we realized it, having been tricked by the lack of darkness Leningrad experiences every summer. Because Leningrad is as far north as the upper part of Hudson Bay, twilight doesn't begin until after 11 p.m., and only lasts until the sun reappears two or three hours later. It never gets dark enough to call it night.

Having no shades, we had to adjust to falling asleep in the pale evening light. When we got up in the morning, we were loaded onto old buses (our second home in Leningrad) and were brought to our dining facility—a cafeteria, half of which served the University, and half of which served workers in the area.

The cafeteria served us all our meals while we were in Leningrad, and the women who worked there were friendly, accepting a little teasing from us, and occasionally dishing it out, along with borsch, for lunch.

The best meal of the day was usually lunch, at least for me, because they served vegetable soups. It was not hard to convince them to refrain from adding a bit of greasy meat, and so the soup was, on most occasions, quite edible. Breakfast was harder to digest, although they occasionally served boiled fruit water (all vegetables and fruits are boiled before serving them), which was some relief from the starchiness of the Russian diet.

The scarcity of a variety of foods (potatoes and cabbage are *not* scarce) must contribute greatly to the Russian tendency towards corpulence, although the delicious Russian breads are not blameless in this matter. There were several varieties of dark breads offered by our cafeteria, but the raisin bread in the mornings was one of the specialties of the house.

Our cafeteria (#57) was located near the back entrance of the University grounds. The buildings of Leningrad State University originally housed the “Twelve Colleges”, a part of Peter the Great’s remodeled government. The baroque style, in which much of Peter’s new city was built in the early eighteenth century, is well represented in the University’s main building, designed by Trezzini. In 1819 the buildings housed the fledgling University of Petersburg, which quickly became famous for its intellectual accomplishments (and for its gift for creating revolutionaries).

Into these famous buildings we trudged every morning at 9 a.m., only to be set free after four hours of instruction in the Russian language. I applied myself at first, in spite of a tendency not to, but I soon discovered that there were students among us who had already been studying Russian for six years (I had had only two) and who still hadn’t mastered it. This discouraged me considerably, until I remembered that I had begun studying Russian simply to be able to visit Russia. And now I was here. I wished to take full advantage of that fact, but the classes six days a week, combined with the lectures or bus tours every afternoon, seemed to be depriving me of that possibility.

We had only had three days of the above regimen before I had tired of it. On the fourth day, however, I was pleasantly surprised with the announcement of an optional (\$30 extra) side trip to Kizhi. I paid without hesitation.