Two Years in the Soviet Union—A Personal Account

By Gerry Magennis

In September 1980 I set off for ten months in the Soviet Union as an exchange student from Great Britain.

When I arrived in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) after a three-day rail trip, I was tired, dirty, and anxious to see what my living conditions were like. I discovered that I was to live in a dormitory. The dorm was, by Soviet standards, luxurious, which meant that there was usually hot water in the showers, and the toilets were cleaned at least once a week, but toilet paper was something you had to provide yourself. It was a capitalist dorm; in other words students from capitalist countries (e.g., America and Western Europe) were housed here along with officially hand-picked Soviet students who were there as shining representatives of the Workers' state.

The reason why almost all students, Soviet and foreign alike, lived in dorms was because of a terrible housing shortage in the Soviet Union. Not only students but also workers from out of town had to live in these cramped and unpleasant conditions. Leningrad is an enormous city of five million people and, as in Moscow (a city of nine million), anyone who wanted to live there had to have a special document. This was extremely difficult to get, but millions of peasants moved to the cities every year. Their reason was simple—a tiny concrete cell of an apartment with electricity and running water, or even a shared room in a crowded dorm, was preferable to a wooden shack miles from anywhere.

Soviet shopping was not like in a modern western supermarket. In the Soviet Union each product had its own shop—if you wanted milk, you had to go to the milk shop, the same for meat and vegetables. Each shop had its own lineup, and, if you were lucky, there was something left to buy when your turn came. Standing in line for an hour for ten eggs (bring your own bag to put them in), then taking them home to find that they were rotten, was something I will never forget. If you wanted, you could complain about service and quality as every shop had a "Complaints Book" prominently displayed. I did once see an angry shopper request this book. The shop assistant took the book from the shelf and began beating the consumer about the head with it —so much for customer service Soviet-style.

Friends and contacts in the Soviet Union in 1980 were more important than anything else, even money. As a graduate, I received 200 rubles a month, more than the average salary, but what use was money if there was nothing to buy with it? However, average Soviet citizens had their own way of doing things, which made survival possible. Here's how it worked. Suppose citizen Popov sees toothpaste on sale—he buys as many tubes as he can, and passes them on to his friends who aren't at the sale. This was how people got their basic necessities. As soon as something appeared in the shops, it disappeared into people's homes. The Russians used to say that in the West there was everything in the shops, but nothing at home, whereas in the Soviet Union there was nothing in the shops, but everything at home. Personal contacts and most-favoured-customer status, obtained through presents, meant that more goods went out the back door of a store than were sold and went out the front. The Russians had a word for it: *blat*, which means influence. You needed influence to put fresh meat on the table or to get a better job. Those lacking influence joined the ranks of the hungry and frustrated.

This means Soviet citizens could not easily have a lifestyle similar to their counterparts in the West. Let me illustrate by telling you about a family I knew. The father was head of a university department, the mother a professor, and the daughter a professional translator, a situation which, in Canada, would generate a combined annual salary of over $100 000, and as a result a good lifestyle. This Soviet family lived in a one-bedroom apartment with the living room becoming the parents' bedroom at night. The father's mother also lived with them. The family car was a seventeen-year-old Lada. They considered themselves lucky because the apartment was downtown, and they had a lot of influence in the local shops, so they didn't have too much trouble getting food.

Why didn't people attempt to change things? The Soviet Union in the period 1980–82 was in the final years of Brezhnev's leadership and of what came to be called the period of stagnation. The country was ruled by old and sick men who were unable and unwilling to change things, and refused to let anyone else change things. What this meant was that no one

was prepared to make any kind of effort, and so the living conditions did not improve.

The role of the military in Soviet life was obvious to anyone who visited the country at that time. This was especially so in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) with its many military training centres. Military uniforms were a common sight on the streets. Not only the Soviet army, but every regional army, from Polish to Mongolian, trained many of its officers in the city. Every male at age eighteen had to spend two years in the armed forces. If he was lucky he spent that two years repairing roads and working on construction for six dollars a month—if he was unlucky he found himself fighting in Afghanistan.

The Soviet war in Afghanistan was a major topic during my stay there. It was almost like America during the Vietnam war, only without the protests. The government pretended that the Afghanistan War wasn't very serious, but the stories were heard everywhere of how terrible it actually was. By 1984 there were even disabled soldiers appearing on the streets, begging for food. The KGB quickly removed these people, as they reminded everyone of a war the government would sooner forget.

It was the KGB more than any other organization, be it the Communist Party or the military, that was responsible for keeping things under control and ensuring that no one complained too loudly about Soviet lifestyles. The basic rule seemed to be that one could abuse the system as much as one wanted, by cheating, bribing, and refusing to work, but anyone caught trying to change it was asking for trouble, and usually got it. In the end, the system continued, while the country was falling to pieces. The nation was in a mood of despair.

How was this mood reflected in the behaviour of ordinary Soviet citizens? Let's take three examples, one who fled, one who stayed, and one who played. The one who fled was a Lithuanian theatre director, Aivaras. He was fed up with the hundreds of government rules that stifled his talent. He was desperate to leave the country. Aivaras eventually left and now lives in the USA, earning his living by selling real estate. This situation was repeated hundreds of thousands of times in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s, with the result that the country lost many talented and educated people.

My second example—the one who stayed in the Soviet Union—was an anti-communist dissident, Rostislav. He was a man who tried desperately to change the rules and the way things were done. This resulted in his arrest and interrogation by the KGB. They were anxious to expel him from the Soviet Union to the West (where many were longing to go), but Rostislav refused to leave, preferring a twelve-year jail sentence on his native soil to freedom in a foreign land.

My third example, and perhaps the most successful of the trio, was the one who played. Boris Grebenshchikov ignored the political situation entirely—it didn't bother him—he was a rock musician, and was only interested in his music, and in keeping his band "Aquarium" together. He played in private apartments, passed the hat around afterwards so that he had enough money to buy bread and cheese. Boris ignored the system, and it left him alone. He was a poor but happy man. He and his music had status among a small and select group of fans. After Gorbachev came to power, Boris and his band became international rock stars, and his albums have been sold all over the world. In spite of his success, he still chooses to live in St. Petersburg rather than Los Angeles.

Shortly after I arrived in the Soviet Union in September 1980, someone who was to become a close friend made a remark that has since turned out to be all too true. She said, "The only thing that can give us freedom in the Soviet Union is an economic collapse." Everyone then and throughout the early 1980s could sense the coming economic collapse, but the mood was one of growing fear: fear that this might lead to the emergence of a new dictator.