



A SOJOURN IN RUSSIA

Travels with art in post-Soviet Russia

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Were initiating our descent and would be landing in Helsinki within the hour. My wife Nance and I had slept well on the flight from San Francisco and were looking forward to the days ahead. With us on the flight were Mark Perlman, a Pittsburgh-born professor of painting at Sonoma State University, descendant of Lithuanian Jews, and Alek Rapoport, a Ukrainian-born artist, living in exile in the US. The purpose of our trip was to attend the exhibitions of their paintings, collectively titled “California Branches—Russian Roots,” that were to take place consecutively in Moscow and St Petersburg. Mark and Alek's invitations to exhibit had come from separate sources. Le Chat, a small Moscow gallery had invited Mark to show, and Alek had received his from a state-sponsored exhibition centre in St Petersburg. As their gallerist, I was asked to coordinate the logistics of putting on these shows and tasked with obtaining funding for the crating, transport and insurance of the work, document preparation and air travel. The gallery staff worked for months on the project, exchanging endless letters with the Russian organisers and sending out requests for funding. By late Spring of 1993 we had secured Finnair's generous support for the transportation of the work and had combined both projects into a single exhibition, to be held first at the Moscow Central House of Artist and, two weeks later, at the St Petersburg Manège Central Exhibition Hall, two vast and prestigious state-sponsored exhibition centres that hosted regular exhibitions of historic and contemporary art.

This was to be Alek's first visit to Russia since his departure sixteen years earlier. A key figure in Leningrad's Soviet-era non-conformist artistic movements opposing the state-sponsored Social Realism School, Rapoport had been a founding member of the dissident group TEV (Fellowship of Experimental Exhibitions) and the anti-establishment art collective ALEF, activities that had brought him under KGB scrutiny, resulting in the loss of his job, house arrest and the proscription against exhibiting anywhere in the country. With life in Russia becoming increasingly untenable, in 1977 Rapoport had taken advantage of the Soviet Union's "invitation" to Jews to emigrate, and gone into exile, travelling through Vienna to Rome, where he presented his request for asylum at the US Embassy. That year he exhibited at the Venice Biennale in *La Nuova Arte Sovietica—Una prospettiva non-ufficiale*, a seminal exhibition of Soviet dissident artists, curated by Enrico Crispolti and Gabriella Moncada, that garnered significant attention in the international press. Granted immigrant status by the US a few months later, he moved with his family to San Francisco. I had been showing his work at the gallery since 1984 and we had become close friends.

The paintings had been shipped to Moscow in advance, so it was with the satisfaction of a job done that we disembarked our Finnair flight and entered the Helsinki airport transit lounge. Our Aeroflot connection to Moscow was soon announced and we boarded the ageing Tupolev, claiming our seats and strapping in prior to take-off. The seats, I noticed, were patched in places with duct tape and the runner carpet was worn through, though having flown on Third-world airlines in the past, I considered its disheveled aspect unimportant. My serenity was interrupted, however, once the plane took off. The window quickly fogged up, and the harsh vibration of the engines caused several screws on the bulkhead and the overhead compartments to come loose, falling at our feet. Nance looked over at me, eyebrows arched, and I gave her hand a comforting squeeze. Nothing to worry about, I assured her, just sit back and enjoy the flight.

Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport was a bustle of activity and we cleared customs and immigration without a hitch. The lavatories on the plane had been sealed with duct tape and now everyone had to use the bathroom. We were directed to a door where a queue of people stood waiting. Upon entering, one was first struck by the reek of excrement. The lavatories were covered in filth, the few unbroken tiles scrawled over with graffiti. No water emerged from the taps at the sinks nor were paper towels or toilet paper anywhere in evidence. The toilet stalls presented an even more discomfiting sight: the solitary hole in the floor showed evidence of prior users' poor aim. Faeces lay in neat piles along its rim and the floor and walls were covered in graffiti and layers of grime. Holding our breath, we hurried through our ablutions before joining the others outside, gasping for air.



Dmitry and his Lada, Moscow, 1993

We had arranged through the organisers of the Moscow exhibition for a driver to be at our disposal every day from 8:00 to 20:00, for which we would pay him a fee of \$15 per diem. At the gates of the airport stood a man holding a sign with my name on it who presented himself as Dmitry, our driver. We all shook hands and introduced ourselves before piling into his ten year-old Lada, its windscreen wipers conveniently removed as a precaution against theft, apparently a recurring problem in Russia. Driving through the streets of Moscow, Dmitry would point out landmarks to us and explain their significance in reasonably good English. I enquired if he had been a driver for long, to which he replied that he didn't drive for a living, he was the head of the Physics Department at Moscow State University and had taken his vacation time to drive for us. The \$15 we gave him each day was equivalent to a month's pay at the University, and the opportunity was simply too good to pass up.

The organisers had also secured an apartment for us, its owners having agreed to vacate it for the duration of our visit in exchange for a reasonable rent. We pulled up to the apartment building and began to unload our luggage. On a plot of muddy earth opposite the building stood a playground, its swing sets hanging empty, each swing broken from its chain. The driver cautioned us to speak no English anywhere in the vicinity of the flat, especially in the entrance or on the stairwell. We were asked to ensure no windows were ever opened. The owners feared repercussions from their neighbours should they learn they'd let out their home to foreigners, and had made this request a



Apartment building in Moscow, 1993

condition of our rental agreement. We climbed the stairs in silence and entered a two-bedroom apartment with a small lounge and kitchenette. Dropping off our luggage, we quietly descended the dark staircase to the street, where Dmitry waited to drive us to the exhibition hall.

The Moscow Central House of the Artists on Krimsky Val is an enormous brutalist cube of a building overlooking the Moscow River, opposite Gorky Park. With 27 halls and 60 galleries, its exhibition schedule keeps the staff busy year round, and our exhibition was just another of the countless shows they produce annually. But their public relations team had done an impressive job and Alek and Mark's exhibition had been the focus of numerous television programmes, it had appeared in the national news for several days running, and as a result the numbers of visitors to the museum had been staggering. We were met by Vladimir, the director of Le Chat Gallery—who seemed to have some connection with the museum—and the rest of the staff with a glass of sweet sparkling wine. Chanting *Na Zdorovie!* after the obligatory toasts, we



Mark Perlman and Alek Rapoport at the Central House of Artists offices, Moscow

were taken down several corridors, past other exhibitions, to two separate, adjacent halls, where each artist's work was hung and lit. A finissage reception had been scheduled a week hence, and until then, we were free to explore the city at will.

Alek was profoundly moved to discover that his work had relevance in Russian artistic circles. After sixteen years in exile, he thought he'd have slipped into obscurity, but the media, the curators and the art community received him with solemn respect, recalling his pivotal rôle in the "dissident" art exhibitions of the seventies and showing him books published by art historians on the artistic activities of the period, where his works were prominently featured. He was especially gratified to see the appearance of Seva, an old friend and colleague from the days he taught art at the Tavricheskaya Art School in Leningrad, who had learnt of Alek's show from a news bulletin on State TV. His journey by train from Chechnya, where he lived, had taken him three days, and the two embraced with tears of joy. Over the course of the afternoon we spent hours fielding questions about the state of the art world in the West, a subject which the Russians, in these early days of glasnost, were curious to learn. Amongst the many people we met was Tenghiz Mirzashvili (1934-2008), a Georgian artist who painted in a naïf style and would generously share his time over the next week to introduce us to the Moscow art scene.



Rapoport's encounter with Seva, old colleague from St Petersburg.

Over the next few days we roamed the streets of Moscow. Tenghiz took us to the Pushkin Museum and the Tretyakov Gallery, where we wandered through the halls marvelling at their extraordinary collections. The requisite ride on its famous Metro fulfilled all our expectations: it was as grandiose as any we'd ever seen, although the silence observed among its passengers was notable. People spoke in whispers, shifting to silence whenever we drew near. The only voices heard were those of a boisterous group of Italian tourists who were clearly enjoying themselves. Alek had previously warned us against making eye contact with any passerby, and I noticed that nobody looked at one another; everyone's gaze was on the floor. Above ground, on the streets, old beggar women at intersections presented the most heartbreaking and pathetic scenes I'd ever witnessed. I enquired about the people I'd noticed going about their business carrying an empty plastic bag and I was told that it was a common practice among Muscovites, who leave their homes each morning with such a bag in the event they should encounter something to buy at one of the ambulatory stands that occasionally appeared on the streets. In one of our walks we stopped at one of these stands and asked a lady in the queue what was on sale.

"I don't know," replied the kind babushka, "but whatever it is, I'm sure I can use it!"

Indeed, shopping was a challenge in Moscow that year. There existed several “dollar shops” that took only dollars and offered a wide range of imported food and drink, their principal customers being tourists and members of the diplomatic corps. Meagre Russian salaries and the ruble-dollar exchange rate made shopping at these stores impossible for the average citizen. But Moscow had the famous Gastronom, the food emporium cited in many Cold War spy novels, and we were determined to fill the larder at our flat like ordinary Muscovites. It was a vast and crowded cavernous space with a central island of cash registers and individual stands lined up along the walls, the goods on offer displayed behind them on shelves. Looking around, we noticed that only three items were on sale: fresh cheese, sausages, and eggs.

“Well, let’s get some eggs, cheese and sausages for the flat,” I suggested, and we each split up, heading to different counters.

I was only the fourth or fifth in line at the cheese stand, so I didn’t have to wait long before the saleslady took my order. She wrote something on a slip of paper and handed it to me, indicating with a nod of her head to the cash registers. The queue at the central island was considerably longer, and it took a quarter of an hour before I could pay and return to the cheese counter, where I waited behind a dozen shoppers before my turn came up to hand over the payment receipt. She took a slab of cheese and cut it, placing it on the scale. But she was a bit short, and had to add an additional slice. This time however, she had cut too much, and had to trim a bit off to round out the kilo before she could wrap it and hand over my purchase. Through all these manoeuvres, I watched transfixed, astonished by the extraordinary patience these shoppers showed, indifferent to having to stand in three queues for a simple kilo of cheese. Outside, I met the others, who shared their own very similar experiences and, loaded with fresh supplies, we all headed home for dinner.





Block where the Diplomatic exhibitions were held in the 1970s. Moscow, 1993.

On a leafy street in the Arbat neighbourhood stood a charming wooden cottage, a vestige of an earlier time. TENGHIZ had taken us to see a pair of art impresarios interested in meeting Alek and showing him some of the numerous books and journals in their collection that documented the difficult years of the various “dissident” art movements. The famous “Bulldozer Exhibition” was catalogued, as well as the many clandestine art exhibitions hosted for the benefit of the foreign diplomatic service who were beginning to collect Russian artists at the time. The exhibitions were usually held in private flats, and invitations would go out to the foreign community by word of mouth. Alek had participated in a number of these exhibitions but had lost track of his work over the years. In 1977, when the Soviet authorities finally issued him his exit visa, he requested permission to emigrate with his paintings, only to be told they were rubbish and it was not in the interest of the Soviet Union to have such work shown abroad.

*The Bulldozer Exhibition was an unofficial art exhibition on a vacant lot in the Belyayevo urban forest by Moscow and Leningrad avant-garde artists on September 15, 1974. The exhibition was forcefully broken up by a large police force that included bulldozers and water cannons, hence the name. (Wikipedia)



Rapoport discovers his work at the apartment where the clandestine exhibitions were held.

This visit in the Arbat had rekindled Alek's memory of those "dipshows", as the clandestine exhibitions for the diplomatic corps were called, and he decided to try and locate the apartment where they were held. Stepping out of Dmitry's Lada at the address Alek remembered, we looked down the length of the block. None of the doors to the buildings had numbers on them so we decided to try them all. The first building we entered looked familiar to Alek, and climbing up to the first floor, we knocked. Behind the young man who answered the door we could see a large painting of a boy in a striped shirt, a portrait that Alek had painted of his son Vladimir in 1974. This was the apartment where those shows were held! He invited us in and apologised for his mother's absence; he knew nothing about the art, his mother owned the collection and she was abroad. In other rooms we located several more of Alek's paintings.

Rapoport wistfully recalled those shows twenty years ago, when the diplomats' cars would line the street, their chauffeurs waiting patiently while their owners flocked to the crowded apartments, eager to buy paintings from those banned artists. Cloaked in thoughtful silence, we returned to the car, and I asked Alek if he regretted having emigrated, seeing how he and his work had grown to be so respected and admired in Russia. Rapoport's efforts to break away from the stylistic formalism of Soviet academicism had caused him enormous difficulties with the authorities, who accused him of "formalistic

distortion, ideological sabotage” and of producing “religious, fascist and Zionist art.” He had been a seminal member of the infamous “Bulldozer Exhibition” and co-founder of dissident art organisations in Leningrad. And yet, despite achieving significant critical success in the underground art community, he had left the Soviet Union seeking integration with the international art world, leaving behind hundreds of paintings whose export had been forbidden by the authorities. These works he would never see again. In San Francisco, Alek found that the Bay Area art community, with its parochial attachment to a “home-grown” culture, was slow in accepting his work, whose powerful expressionistic paintings were more in line with Titian and Giotto and the icons of Andrei Rublev than the light-filled canvases of Diebenkorn, Thiebaud, or Francis. Rejected by the California art establishment, Alek remained a dissident in San Francisco as he had been in Russia.

“I have no regrets,” he replied. “I made my bed and I must lie in it.”

Over the next few days I began to notice an appreciable change in Alek’s mood. His initial enthusiasm and the euphoria he felt upon arriving in Russia had darkened, and he began to display increasing signs of paranoia. He continuously warned us of prying eyes and began to suspect Mark of insidious schemes against him, much to Mark’s consternation. Alek’s parents had both been arrested during Stalin’s purges. His father was shot and his mother spent ten years in Siberian labour camps for “crimes against the State.” He was raised by an aunt in Kiev until the outbreak of World War II, when he was evacuated to the city of Ufa, in the Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. These years of extreme loneliness, cold, hunger, and deprivation defined his character and were the foundation of his search for the spiritual in art. Returning to Russia had been an emotional roller coaster for Alek. His wife Irina had refused to travel with him, unable to go through the heart-wrenching trauma of having to, once again, leave her friends behind. Russia represented his origins, and he was torn by conflicting feelings of love-hate for the country. Being back in the land of his birth had brought out the fears and suspicions that had characterised much of his formative years.





One day Vladimir drove us in his van to Zagorsk on the Golden Ring, where the monasteries of Sergiyev Posad are. One of the of greatest of Russian monasteries, it had been in existence since the 15th century and was said to be the cradle of the Russian Orthodox Church. Vladimir parked outside while Mark, Alek, Nance and I explored the intricate network of ancient buildings, admiring the architecture, the ancient murals and the centuries-old icons, nestled snugly in their iconostases. Stern bearded monks with long, greasy hair, a wide leather belt cinched tightly round their black robes, crossed us in the passageways, the clomping of their stiff leather boots breaking the silence of the halls. At some point, having lost Mark and Alek, Nance and I entered a chapel where a mass was beginning. From the stained-glass windows above pencil-like beams of light pierced the swirling incense, illuminating the babushkas who stood in a group in the centre of the circular nave, kerchiefs tied round their heads. Behind the altar was a floor-to-ceiling iconostasis, a gilded field filled with icons. From its sides we heard the sounds of the most beautiful chants we had ever heard. The sweet harmonies of a choir of monks, concealed behind the iconostasis, filled the air, and we stood in awe, profoundly touched by the beauty of the simple ceremony. After the mass, the monks emerged and the babushkas queued up to kneel down and kiss their hands.

“If this is what their masses sound like, I’ll convert tomorrow!” I murmured.

Nance nodded in agreement and we left to find our friends. Mark and Alek were outside the complex, sitting with Vladimir in the van.

“You’ve missed the most extraordinary thing! We just heard a mass that was moving beyond description. Where were you?” I asked.

“This is a bad place,” replied Alek. “We had very bad feelings here and couldn’t stay.”

They both explained that they had felt a deep hostility from the monks, an unconcealed anti-Semitism that had made them extremely uncomfortable.

“But how could they know you were Jews?” I replied, nonplussed.

“You know. If you’re a Jew, you know these things.”

I wondered if Alek’s paranoia was beginning to affect Mark as well. We rode back in silence, stopping along the way to buy a litre of milk from a farmer by the road. Back in our flat an hour later, I found the milk had curdled. The jostling of the van on the pot-holed roads had turned the fresh milk to yoghurt.





Tenghiz prepares lunch.

The following day Tenghiz invited us to lunch at his home. He lived on the outskirts in one of those faceless, Soviet-era blocks of flats that crowd the periphery. As we were enjoying our tea he proposed we visit a collector of his work in town whom we might find interesting. The art market in Russia at the time was virtually non-existent. Earnings were so limited that nobody had two kopeks to rub together, let alone to indulge in the luxury of collecting art. Artworks were generally traded amongst artists or given freely to supporters who genuinely admired their art, for Russians were deeply committed to culture and had a profound and thoughtful appreciation for it. Who could this person be, we asked ourselves, was there really an incipient collector base in this country, struggling so hard to shed its Soviet past? So it was with more than idle curiosity that we gladly accepted his invitation, piling into Dmitry's Lada for the trip downtown.

Pulling up outside a white two-storey villa of neoclassical design, we crossed the small, well-kept garden to the front door. I expected to find the usual rows of buzzers, typical in old houses that had been broken up into numerous dwellings, but on this door there was only a single bell, which Tenghiz rang. A maid dressed in black with a white apron and mob-cap answered the door and showed us in to see Madame. In a

room filled with objets d'art, contemporary paintings and antiques, we were greeted in perfect English by the delightful lady of the house, an elegant, elderly woman in a velvet pant-suit. The house backed on to the Pushkin Museum and the living room looked out onto a large garden. Leaning against the garden wall were several ancient wrought-iron grates that she had recently found in a ruined convent. She was delighted with her find and explained that they were to be placed over the street-level windows. The maid who brought in the tea set spilt a few drops on the table cloth and our hostess apologised for her clumsiness.

"It's very difficult to find decent servants these days, I hope you'll excuse me," she explained, as she poured the tea.

My jaw dropped. Who was this woman? Is this a vestige of the Soviet era I didn't know about? Servants in the Soviet Union? Our hostess's comments on servants or of finding antiques in condemned ruins mirrored the talk of any upper-middle class woman of Western Europe, conversations I had grown up hearing, and I found it hard to reconcile them with my idea of what it meant to live under the Soviet system. Her daughter had been a prima ballerina at the Bolshoi Ballet, she explained, but a terrible car accident had ended her career and she now required full care and rehabilitation. She also had a son, a physician practicing in Connecticut, who she unfortunately saw only during the holidays, usually at their flat on Avenue Foch, in Paris. She also owned an apartment on Fifth Avenue in New York, but, regrettably, seldom went there.

These incongruencies only piqued my curiosity and I asked her to tell me more about her life. Her husband had been a physician, she said, and a close personal friend of Armand Hammer's, a wealthy entrepreneur who had a long history with the Soviet Union. Apart from his large investments in oil production, Hammer had served as a conduit for bringing needed drugs into the country and surplus American wheat to help stem the recurring famines. His work had secured for him a very influential position in relationship to Lenin and Stalin, to whom he was alleged to have warned, "If you want to keep working with me, hands off Dr. X. He is to be untouchable," referring to Madame's husband. Through the years of Stalin's repressive rule she and her family had lived unhampered in Moscow, free to pursue their careers and build their fortunes. We were in the presence of a member of the Nomenklatura, the privileged class of Soviet citizens who lived like their peers, the upper classes of Western Europe.

My head spun.





Finissage speeches.

The day of the finissage had arrived and we were summoned that afternoon to the Central House of Artists for the closing ceremonies. Later that evening we were scheduled to take the night train to St Petersburg and we had packed our bags in anticipation. Vladimir had organised a farewell party for us at his gallery after the event and had assured us he would get us to the station on time. Dmitry dropped us and our luggage off at the museum and we thanked him for his service and paid him off, stowing our bags in a store-room for later retrieval. The finissage was well attended. A good crowd of visitors stood idly by, sipping sweet sparkling wine while members of the museum staff and other cultural personalities gave speeches. After the ceremony, we stood on the terrace overlooking the river and said good bye to the staff, thanking them for their efforts and receiving their best wishes for the next venue.

Vladimir gathered up our luggage and we all piled into his van for the drive to his gallery. Le Chat Gallery was housed in a squat, two-storey cylinder of a building, and Vladimir took our bags down a spiral staircase and stowed them in the basement. The ground floor was the main exhibition space, though considering his confident boast that his gallery was “the most important one in Moscow,” we were surprised to find a dimly lit, dust-filled room where the only artworks on view were a couple of half-wrapped paintings leaning face to the wall. Empty boxes and strewn papers lay scattered on the

floor, and used clothing hung from the broken furniture positioned around a large table laden with pickled fish, sausages and bottles of vodka and sweet sparkling wine. Steadily, the place filled up with artists and well-wishers and the party was soon in full swing. Toasts and *Na Zdorovies* rose above the clamour of the cigarette-smoking revellers, and everyone seemed to be having a good time. But our train was scheduled to leave in an hour and I feared we'd miss it in the heat of the festivities. For some minutes, I had been trying to make eye contact with Vladimir while pointing to my watch, but he merely smiled and told me not to worry, everything was fine. With only a half hour left till departure time, my concerns had grown in earnest. The four of us were now debating whether we should call for a taxi and wondering where he'd stowed our luggage. Yet Vladimir was unperturbed. "Not to worry, my friends, everything is okay," he insisted. Finally, with twenty minutes to spare, he told us to wait outside, where his van was parked, while he retrieved our bags.

Alek showed me a length of rope, 40 centimetres long. "Look what my friends gave me as a going-away present," he said. I was touched. Russians are notoriously sentimental, and I interpreted the rope as a symbol of undying friendship, that no matter the distances separating friends, this piece of rope represented their close bonds, never to be broken.

"How endearing! The rope symbolises your friendship, no? What lovely people!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he replied. "This rope is to tie the train compartment doors shut to protect us from being robbed in the night!"

With tyres screeching, Vladimir made a U-turn and hurtled at top speed through the dark streets of Moscow, the four of us clinging to our seats for dear life. Double-parking the van in front of the station with seven minutes to spare, he warned,

"Whatever you do, speak not a word of English, do you understand?"

My three companions dashed into the train to find our compartment while I accompanied Vladimir to the window where pillows and blankets were issued for the journey. He presented our tickets and I was handed the bedding. The price difference between what foreigners are charged and what Russians pay were a hundred-to-one, and Vladimir had insisted on offering this final service before seeing us off. I thanked him once again and boarded the train as it was beginning to leave.

*Interestingly, our fellow passengers in the next compartment reported having been robbed during the night, alleging that sleeping gas had been pumped under their door and their luggage gone through.

The compartment had two sets of bunks. Mark and Alek took the lower berths and Nance and I the upper ones. Alek used his rope to tie the handles together and we each climbed into our bunks and settled in. Waking early the next morning, I untied Alek's rope and made my way to the dining car, where two or three people sat alone in silence. I took my seat at a table and ordered some tea. Tasselled and brocaded curtains covered the windows and, eager to enjoy the scenery, I pulled the string that made the curtain at my table roll up. Instantly, the waiter was back at my table with a harsh reprimand, pulling it back down. I couldn't understand the need to keep the curtains closed. I couldn't see how a curtain-less window could bother someone, seeing how the sun was out and the dining coach mostly empty. It was a Russian peculiarity that had puzzled me since we'd arrived. We'd eaten in restaurants in Moscow that had wide picture windows offering views to pleasant parks or avenues, but these views were predictably concealed behind heavy curtains. Were these visual barriers designed to prevent outsiders from looking in, or was their purpose to keep those within from seeing what took place outside? It was a mystery I was never able to solve.

I was mulling over this issue when Nance showed up at my table reporting an uncomfortable row between the Alek and Mark, who had woken to Alek's fierce accusation of going through his bags and trying to steal from him. That Mark would try to steal from Alek was preposterous, and Nance had tried to calm the waters by insisting to Alek that she had got up in the night to use the lavatory and had inadvertently stepped on his bag. Surely that was what had disturbed his sleep, it was unthinkable that Mark would ever try to steal from him, his allegation was clearly a mistake. Mark was understandably outraged, but Alek stubbornly refused to consider any alternative, and the tension between them was palpable.





View from the apartment in St Petersburg.

It was in icy silence that we pulled into St Petersburg. We had all planned to stay in the Vasileostrovsky District, at the flat of a friend the Rapoport's, a retired ballet dancer who was staying with her daughter during our visit. But Mark wouldn't countenance another day in Alek's company and we split up. Mark went off to stay with friends we'd met in Moscow* who'd travelled up on the same train and Alek, Nance and I moved into the flat. It was a pleasant, well-lighted place with a large living-room occupied by a baby grand, a considerable improvement over our cramped quarters in Moscow.

We would see little of Alek during our stay in St Petersburg. The season was early July, close to the solstice—when the sun barely sets at these latitudes—and the city famously celebrates its White Nights. Alerted to his presence in the city and accustomed to staying up late, old friends would call him at all hours of the day and night and he was often away, leaving us to explore the city on our own. We had not arranged for a driver this time, but had been assured that transportation around the city was a matter of simply putting out your hand. A private vehicle would invariably stop and, for the price of a dollar, would deliver you to your destination. The system worked, and over the next few days, while we awaited the arrival of the art, we hop-scotched freely around the city, taking boat trips through the canals to the Peter and Paul Fortress, rides out to Peterhof, or simply taking in the sights. Peter the Great's city, as is well known, is a stunning



Unopened crates wait in the Manège.

monument to Baroque architecture. Built over just a few years by Italy's most prestigious architects, it retains a stylistic unity of extraordinary beauty. But the ravages of Russian winters and years of Soviet neglect had left their mark and those grand houses now lay in sad decay. Where once a single family had lived in comfort, was now shared by a dozen, as attested by the rows upon rows of buzzers affixed next to front doors.

Notified of the arrival of the paintings, we gathered at the exhibition hall to arrange for their display and meet the director. The Manège Central Exhibition Centre is the former riding hall for the Imperial Horse Guards, a building of austere neoclassical design fronted by eight enormous doric columns. Inside the vast hall, temporary walls had been erected over a gleaming, dark green marble floor where, clustered at its centre, our crates stood unopened. We were ushered in to see the director, who graciously welcomed us to St Petersburg and accepted the "gift" of the videocamera I had brought for her, a condition she had stipulated for the exhibition of the works. After an amiable chat, we returned to the galleries to meet the installation crew. Half a dozen young men who had been standing idly around the crates introduced themselves. The crates lay untouched, and, understanding that they too, would require a "gift," I asked Nance to run out and buy the largest bottle of vodka she could find. She promptly returned with a magnum, which we offered to the crew.

"Spasiba bolshoi!" they cried. "Come into our office, please!" We were led into a dust closet, on either side of which two rows of chairs were lined up

facing each other. We all sat down, our knees grazing those seated opposite. The crew chief proceeded to open the bottle, glasses were produced and soon we were all toasting to the exhibition's success. After a couple of rounds we politely declined any more, but the crew had other intentions, and in twenty minutes they had polished off the bottle. Thus fortified, we all returned to the gallery. The crew stood round, commenting on the crates and praising their sturdy construction. I acknowledged that the boxes had been well built and suggested we get started on the installation by opening them.

"That is impossible," the crew chief informed me. "They are screwed together with a type of screw we have no tools for!" Indeed, the crates had been sealed with phillips-head screws.

"Don't you have phillips-head screw drivers?" I asked.

"Never use them here," he replied.

"Here, take some money and go out to a hardware store and buy yourselves half a dozen screw drivers."

"There are no hardware stores in St Petersburg."

I couldn't believe it. These paintings had travelled half-way round the world to end up unseen for lack of a simple screw driver. The situation had taken on distinct surrealistic tones. During this exchange Nance had been rummaging through her bag, from which she extracted her Swiss Army knife.

"Voilà! Try this!" she cried, opening up the requisite blade.

With tool in hand, the crew began their work, and after a few hours we had all the paintings out, lined up against the wall in their order of display. Hanging the work required the use of two wooden step ladders, four metres tall, which a member of the crew would nimbly climb and perch himself astride the top. Given their glassy-eyed enthusiasm after consuming a magnum of vodka, I was apprehensive of their abilities and feared the worst. But my anxieties proved unfounded as I watched the fellow at the top of the ladder "walk" the entire contraption under his feet with great aplomb, moving the ladder from place to place like a man on stilts, without ever having to come down. Eventually, the shows were hung and we departed, arranging to meet again for the opening, several days hence.



Lyuba, Nance and Mark visit closed galleries of the Hermitage.

A curator at the Hermitage Museum, Lyuba was a friend and colleague of Alek's wife, Irina, who had also been a curator there. She had kindly given us a personalised tour of the museum, amazing us with her photographic memory and personal anecdotal knowledge of every item on display. She had also secured for us tickets to see Eugene Onegin at Catherine the Great's intimately scaled Imperial theatre at the Hermitage, whose semicircular rows of seats faced each other rather than the stage, conceived to allow for the aristocratic audience of the time to appraise each others' finery whilst the show went on. Later, as we sat drinking tea in her book-lined apartment, she asked,

"Would you like to visit an artist's studio? There's an interesting one nearby you might like to meet."

Mark and I immediately agreed and Lyuba wrote down his address, informing us he'd expect us at three the following afternoon. Unwilling to arrive empty handed, we'd purchased a bottle of vodka beforehand, and that afternoon we stood with our shopping bag before a grand mansion on a canal, puzzling over the list of names on the buzzers. After several tries, the door buzzed open and we entered the foyer. Years of grime covered the walls and broken tiles lay in heaps over the dirty marble floors. An elegant curving staircase led to the floors above, and we followed it up, stepping over chipped and

missing steps. Along the wall on our right, a number of windows were broken, letting in the outside air. They appeared to have been broken for years and I wondered what they did in winter to keep the cold out. On the first floor landing was a door, a column of name tags nailed beside it, where our host waited to show us down a narrow corridor to his lodgings. The five by six-metre room had been partitioned with curtains into several smaller areas and we were invited to sit on a couch while he prepared the tea.

“We have brought you this small token of our appreciation,” I said, pulling out the bottle.

He replied that he didn’t touch alcohol. Mark and I looked at each other and shrugged: apparently, Russians’ appreciation for vodka was not universal. He explained that until recently, he had shared this space with his wife, his parents, and their dog, the curtained sections affording them some modicum of privacy. But in recent years they had found other accommodations and he now used this space solely as a studio. We saw little evidence of his work, however, the only painting on the wall being an ancient icon in its repoussé frame. We spent a few minutes in polite conversation, grasping at something to talk about, when he enquired,

“Would you like to look round at the rest of the floor?”

The narrow corridor outside his room led past the front door to other rooms. The first door on our right opened to a large kitchen, shared by all the residents of the floor, which must have been the original one from pre-Revolutionary times. Bright white tiles covered the walls and various windows to the street let in ample light. But the corridor was dark: lit only by a single 40-watt bulb, the filthy walls of uncertain colour made it hard to see where we were going.

“Why don’t you get together with your neighbours and paint this corridor?” I suggested. “If you gave it a coat of white paint and put in a higher-wattage bulb you’d be able to see better!”

“That is impossible,” he replied. “This house does not belong to us.”

“So who does it belong to?”

“The State!”

“But how long have you lived here?”

“Thirty years. Anyway, even if we did decide to paint it, one neighbour would want to paint it yellow, another blue, and a third white. Since we could never agree on

what colour to use, it's best to leave it as it is."

We had arrived at the end of the corridor, where two doors faced each other at the cul-de-sac. He pointed to the door at the end and explained that the fellow who lived there had a serious drinking problem. Incapable of negotiating the lock to his apartment door in his inebriated state, he would often be found by his neighbours passed out on the landing. Next door lived a family whose two young daughters would invariably return home at night to find their neighbour sprawled out in a pool of urine on the floor.

"This had become a serious problem. The poor girls had to step over him to get into their flat, so the neighbours got together to formulate a plan and help out the poor man," he explained.

I envisioned a community effort aimed at assisting the alcoholic neighbour with his disease, perhaps a detox clinic or a Russian version of Alcoholics Anonymous.

"So did you have him committed to a rehabilitation centre?" I enquired.

"Rehabilitation centre? No, we simply had his keyhole moved to a place he could access when he was down on all fours. Look, see what we did?"

Peering closely in the gloom, we could see the keyhole positioned neatly 30 centimetres from the floor.





Cutting the ribbon at the opening ceremony.

The day had arrived for the opening at Manège. We entered the hall to see a large crowd assembled including members of the press and the museum staff, gathered about the paintings, waiting for the ceremonies to commence. We were toggled up in our best clothes and had brought two more magnums of vodka for the crew. Catching my eye, the crew chief stepped out of the crowd and sidled up to me. I handed him the bottles with our thanks and was about to turn away, when he blurted,

“Nice camera you got the boss!”

I murmured my thanks and repeated our appreciation for their work in hanging the show. It looked very good indeed. Putting on his most innocent face, he asked,

“Are you interested in seeing these paintings get back safely to America?”

I immediately understood his implicit comment and pulled out some notes.

“Here you are, with my sincere thanks. Please distribute them as you see fit.”

“They’ll be back in San Francisco better than new,” he replied with a wink, stepping back into the crowd.

The opening ceremony consisted of a series of speeches, delivered by the various officials to an attentive audience, ending with the solemn cutting of a ribbon, an act I was honoured to perform. Afterwards, observing the milling crowd, I was struck by the fact that everyone seemed to be looking closely at the work, either singly, or discussing it in groups. In the hundreds of vernissages I had seen or participated in over the years, my experience was that of visitors gathered in groups, the obligatory wine glass in hand, talking animatedly amongst themselves, their backs to the art. Gallery openings in the West seem to have a primary social function and the artwork on display is often relegated to secondary importance. In St Petersburg however, the audience stood in rapt attention before each painting, scrutinising it with great interest. Moreover, long queues had begun to gather in front of the artists with people lining up to ask serious, intelligent questions of a conceptual or technical nature, whereas in the West conversations between artists often drifted to art market issues, gallery relations, and the like. It is true that Alek had a large circle of friends, and they had all come to the opening, but the impression I received was that of an audience genuinely interested in art and hungry to unravel the mysteries it contained.

As I reflected, I recalled the numerous lunches and dinners we'd been invited to since arriving in St Petersburg. Considering how difficult it was to acquire foodstuffs, the lavish spreads presented at their tables spoke to me of great sacrifice and generosity. Enormous plates of viands and piroshkis, pickles, brined mackerel and caviar, bowls of



Nance and Perlman visit an artist's studio, St Petersburg.

borscht with homemade breads and sweet desserts or cakes were offered with the requisite toasts of vodka and good Georgian wine—the sweet, sparkling stuff of openings mercifully absent—prepared in kitchens no larger than a closet. To gather all this food took considerable effort, and yet they shared it easily and with good cheer.

Often, conversations were of a literary nature. An engineer who lived next to Stroganovsky Park, on the Chernaya River, Fyodor had invited us all to dinner. Amongst the large group of friends assembled at the table was Seva, who'd continued his trip from Chechnya to be with Alek in St Petersburg. They had both worked together in theatre design, and after dinner, he invited us to step out into the park and hear tell of Pushkin's final moments. Positioning us amongst the trees, he re-enacted the event, describing with chilling commentary the final duel where the cuckolded poet met his nemesis, Georges d'Anthès, a scene that would remain with us for life.

Other times, the conversations took on a political turn and I was surprised to learn of their contempt for Mikhail Gorbachov who, as initiator of glasnost and perestroika, was greatly admired in the West. They saw in him a betrayal to the principles of the Revolution, a man bent on currying to the whims of the capitalist West, whose policies would inevitably lead Russia to a disappointing future.

“We Russians need a strong leader, like Stalin,” Fyodor asserted.

Their complaints were not merely ideological. In the few years since Gorbachov's campaign had begun, many Russians had seen their life's savings disappear. Once artificially pegged to the dollar, since the collapse of the Soviet Union the ruble had lost 85% of its value, and Fyodor's savings were now worthless. At the same time, a new kind of Russian had emerged. Financial wealth was now the ultimate goal of this new class and they were viewed with derision by those in Alek's intellectual milieu. A recent poll, in which high-school girls were asked about their professional futures, showed that the vast majority of them hoped to become prostitutes. High-priced call-girls could now be seen on the streets of the city, emerging from fancy cars in their expensive furs, and they were viewed by many schoolgirls as holding the key to financial success and liberation.

It was to be our last day in St Petersburg and we were scheduled to take a flight to Helsinki later that afternoon. But we had yet to visit the State Russian Museum with its formidable collection of Russian icons, and we hired a driver for the ride to the airport instructing him to stop by the museum on the way. Entering the lobby, Nance and I went up to the window and asked for two tickets, placing a ten dollar bill

on the counter. The woman replied that she took no dollars and instructed us to get change. Having spent all our rubles, we only had enough left to pay the driver, so we sought out a change house. The stack of bills we received brought home the discrepancy between what foreigners and nationals are charged for the same service. The entire stack was the price for us to enter as foreigners, but as Russians, a single note would get us both in. I was unable to tolerate this disparity and asked Nance to go to the window and buy the tickets as a Russian.

“All you need to do is put the money on the counter, say ‘dva billete pazhalsta’ and we’re in!” I entreated.

We practiced several times, trying to get her pronunciation into a credible facsimile of Russian, but she was hopeless. Languages had never been her forte.

“You’ll have to do it,” she said, exasperated.

“But she’ll recognise me from ten minutes ago and know I’m a foreigner!”

“Take off your shirt and present yourself in your undershirt. Anyway, she never seems to look at people’s faces.”

Clad only in my undershirt, I went back to the window, placed my solitary note on the counter and uttered the magic words. Without comment, the lady slipped two tickets through the slot and we were in. Over the next hour we admired the works of Andrei Rublev and his peers in absolute silence, fearful of being discovered as fake Russians. Fully satiated, we returned to our driver, who deposited us at the gates of the airport and unloaded our bags. In my pocket, I still had that large stack of unspent bills, so I gave them to the driver and we marched into the terminal to meet Mark for the long flight home.





Alek Rapoport, Moscow

Alek had stayed behind. He still had people to see and would be catching a later flight. The endless interviews, gatherings and ceaseless phone calls had put a strain on him, and the emotional weight of it all would change him forever. After returning to San Francisco, Alek retreated into seclusion, concentrating on his own creative work, and I would see little of him.

An artist I had met in Moscow, Natalya Nesterova, whose work I had first seen in that lovely cottage in the Arbat, had come to San Francisco the following year at my invitation to work on a monotype project. Nance and I threw a cocktail party for her at our home, inviting—with Irina's help—all the Bay Area Russian expatriate art community we could muster. We had visited her studio in Moscow, a well-appointed, well-lighted room, where she had shown us her work and spoken to us of her son, living in Brussels, whom she frequently visited. A member of the Academy, it was clear to us she was a successful artist, one who travelled freely and exhibited regularly in Europe and New York. Though gracious, Natalya complained that she had not come to America to meet more Russians, and asked instead that we allow her to work at her own pace in isolation, without interruptions. Nonetheless, she enjoyed the camaraderie of fellow artists and partook in the merrymaking with good cheer. Through the animated gaiety of the evening, Alek stood quietly in the corner, lost in thought, impervious to the posturing and one-upmanship on display.

Alek died three years later. His body was found in his studio, sitting before Anastasis I, a painting based on the apocryphal fourth-century Gospel of Nicodemus, which was to be his last completed canvas. He had returned to his roots, to the “incandescent coals of the Old Russian icons,” as remarked by the critic V. Baranovsky. His son, Vladimir Rapoport, observed that Alek “did not endure emigration easily. What a pathetic life, everything repeats itself, he had once said, quoting from the letters of Albrecht Dürer, another artist who saw himself as born in the wrong place and time.”