PAUL THEROUX

A REAL RUSSIAN IKON

Fred Hagberg, forewarned by his travel agent in Cleveland of the Russian hunger for hard cash, had been in Moscow for two days and there had not been even a glimmer of interest in his dollars. The plastic cover of his American Express wallet stayed buttoned; Intourist paid all the bills. He expected to be guided to seedy black-market shops off the beaten track or, at the very least, pestered for cigarettes and Chiclets. There wasn't a peep from the Muscovites, and Fred thought maybe his travel agent meant somewhere else.

On the evening of the third day he was ambling along Karl Marx Prospekt, where it runs into Manège Square, returning from the Palace of Congresses where he had seen Verdi hysterically acted and shrieked to an audience of cows. The Mob of Shuffling Humanity, he called them, as they slushed along the sidewalk in felt boots, oblivious of everything, ignoring everything, tramping nowhere into the night. Fred hated their guts. He had just turned away from the revolting sight of two Russians eating (eating! on the sidewalk! at night!) when it happened.

There was a voice, the thickened tongue lap of the impossible language, audible but disembodied. Fred looked down. A small boy in a blue Bolshevik beanie, hands crammed into the pockets of a capelike coat, lurched alongside him. The boy was looking away, looking around in the direction of a slapping banner which, secured by cables, was being driven against the trolley wires by the wind and making sparks.

'Cherman?'

The boy turned from the slapping banner to the Obelisk to Revolutionary Thinkers, peered at the spikes and spoke again.

'Enklis?'

'American,' said Fred.

'Unidestates?'

Fred nodded and blew on his hands. He saw that the boy was still avoiding his gaze, looking distractedly elsewhere, slouching along the salt-gritty sidewalk, the perfection of KGB aplomb, furtive but at the same time very cool.

The next exchange took Fred a while to understand, for each time the boy spoke he

looked away. The boy apparently wanted chewing gum: Fred had none. The boy wanted a ballpoint pen (he called it a ‘pallboint’): Fred said yes. He fingered his Parker Jotter. The boy turned sharply right and headed toward a newspaper kiosk, closed up for the night. Fred followed.

In the glare of the sputtering arc lamp high above, Fred saw in the boy’s palm a small enamel pin stamped with the gold head of Lenin and the dates 1917–1967. ‘Nice medal, good, best,’ said the little boy. ‘For the pen.’

‘Deal,’ said Fred, offering it.

The boy took a deep breath, rolled his eyes up, prodded the Parker up his sleeve and, turning away, deftly passed the little pin to Fred. The blue beanie disappeared into the darkness at the steps that led to 25th Oktober Street, behind the Ploshchad Revolutsii Metro entrance.

Back at the Metropole Hotel, in a room heated to a skin-crinkling eighty, Fred flicked on the fake chandelier and examined the pin. He knew, with that certainty that comes quickly to travelers, that he had been swindled. He ground it into the squares of shrunken parquet with his heel, and then spat.

Over a breakfast of syrupy coffee and flaking pastry Fred collected his thoughts. He had not, he decided, lost completely: a deal had been made. Only shrewdness had been missing, and that on his part. He had been too eager. Furthermore he had been dealing with a kid. But several things stood out in the incident, and these were important: the Russians made deals, they talked to foreigners, and they were cagey. Pondering these Russian qualities Fred missed the English Speakers’ tour of the city. There was only one thing left, something Fred had counted on seeing: the graveyard of the Novodevichy Convent, where Svetlana’s mother was buried. She was the lady, mentioned in the Twenty Letters, to whom Stalin had called, ‘Hey you!’ and who, miffed, had gone upstairs and shot herself.

The taxi stand was at Sverdlovsky Square, near the Bolshoi Theater. A long line of people, laden with fishnet shopping bags (some showing withered fruit), stood morosely in mangy fur hats and ankle-length overcoats. Their noses glowed red, redder than the flags on the light poles or the banners on the Bolshoi which praised the Komsomol for fifty years of tireless devotion.

Fred fumbled for a cigarette with cold hands. He picked open the crushed pack of Luckies and withdrew a bent one. Smoothing it slowly, he felt subtle pressure on his sides, two warm bears, then a voice, a steamy word.

‘Enklis?’

‘United States,’ said Fred, squirming, feeling for his wallet of traveler’s checks. He smelled pickpockets.

‘Amerikansk?’

‘Yeah,’ said Fred, looking up into a raw knobby face.

‘Toureest?’

‘Mm.’

Without moving a muscle Fred felt himself turning in the taxi line, revolving on an axis like a slow-motion soldier. Again, without any effort on his part, he was borne by the pressure of the two bears to the near sidewalk where the giant seated figure of Ostrovsky in bronze brooded over a bird-limed manuscript.

Shortly, they were in a tearoom, the Uyut (Cozy) on Leninsky Prospekt, exchanging names. The bears were Igor and Nikolai and, by way of introduction, said they liked Willis Conover, someone Fred had never heard of, though Igor insisted he was a great American. Other names were dropped – Jim Reeves, the Beatles, Dave Brubeck, Jack London, President Kennedy – and then they got down to business.

‘Dollars?’

‘You mean, do I have dollars?’

‘To have dollars,’ said Nikolai.

‘Sure, I’ve got everything. I’m going around the world on the Pan Am flight. Pan American. You know what I mean?’

‘American dollars. Very nice,’ said Igor. ‘You want rubles?’

‘I want an ikon,’ said Fred. And added, ‘For my mother.’

Neither Russian understood.

‘Ikon, ikon, ikon.’

Nikolai mumbled to Igor, whose face brightened. ‘You want eekone?’

Fred nodded. It seemed useless to speak.

‘Eekone,’ said Nikolai. He giggled.

‘We find eekone, you pay dollars us,’ said Igor. ‘To want rubles.’

‘It’s got to be a good one. A good one.’

‘Don’t whorry.’

They were in a battered taxi, Fred in the back seat with Nikolai, the silent one. Igor, taller, more garrulous, sat in front with the driver, giving instructions. Down the wide avenues they sped, jockeying through the traffic, the little taxi slipping between a Zyl and a Zym, two tanklike cars resembling old Packards, complete with chrome jaws. They drew up to a shop that looked like a pawnbroker’s, where Igor fought to the front of a mob of people around a counter and shouted the familiar word. A shopgirl folded her arms across her smock and shook her head.

At another similar place a shopgirl pointed to an inferior painting on the wall depicting a muscular bleeding Christ. Igor looked questioningly at Fred. Fred said, ‘Nyet.’

The taxi driver seemed to take an interest in the search. He muttered to Igor; Igor muttered back; Nikolai emitted a cluck, sucking at his front teeth, the sound that in most of Europe means yes. They were off again, and from the way the Russians settled back in their seats it looked as if it was going to be a long ride. They passed under the red banners which Fred drew their attention to. When they saw that Fred was interested they read each one – quite a feat, since there were three to a block and the taxi was going fast.

‘Great Russian People,’ said Igor, pointing. ‘Good Komsomol Fifty Year … Hail Russian Worker.’ He interspersed the banners with sales talk as well: ‘Work Hard … Dollars very nice … Build State … Cash or check?… Remember Comrade Lenin … We find real Russian eekone … Crush Imperialism …’

They rode for several miles more, into a dingy suburb squeezed with old one-story houses. The eaves of these houses were carved, but all were in disrepair. The taxi parked on the sidewalk. The driver got out, shouted something to Igor, and then disappeared through a gray wooden door. Fred made a move to get up, but Igor waved him back.

‘Nice scarf,’ Igor finally said.

‘This one?’ Fred fingered his scarf.

‘Sell?’

‘I need it. It’s cold here.’

‘Ten rubles, fifty kopeks.’

‘I want an ikon, an ikon! I need this scarf. It’s cold –’

Igor stirred. The driver was giving a signal from the doorway of the ramshackle house. ‘We go,’ said Igor.

Fred was allowed to go in first. On entering, he did not notice the old lady, but when his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness he saw her – small, pale, standing fretfully among draped furniture, her white hair appearing in several tendrils from under her shawl. Her facial skin was loose and wrinkled, as if she had once been fat, the skin stretched and retaining its former size. Her eyebrows were heavy, her hands were large, she wore three sweaters and appeared much afraid.

Igor addressed the old lady. In the conversation that went on Fred heard the word Amerikansk again. The second time he heard it he smiled at the old lady, who looked incredulous for a moment, then stepped closer to Fred and smiled. It was an open, trusting smile which revealed her small fine teeth and creased her whole face like an old apple. She spoke to Fred in Russian.

‘She asking you to want tea. She have her brother in America.’

‘Look, I didn’t come here for tea,’ said Fred. The old lady implored him with an odd grace. ‘Okay, I’ll have a cup of tea.’

A smoking, steaming samovar was brought. It was brass and, even in that dingy room stuffed with junk, gleamed like a church fixture. A small valve at the top popped open, shooting jets of steam into the chill air. The old lady placed a teapot under the spigot and twisted the key: hot water bubbled out. There were no wires anywhere.

Fred smacked his lips. ‘That’s some contraption!’

‘You like?’ It was Igor, smiling like a cat and rubbing his hands.

‘How much?’

The smile left Igor’s face. He turned to the old lady who, when Igor spoke, shut the hot water off and looked quickly at Fred. She showed her large gnarled hands, shrugged and said several words.

‘No sell, she say.’

‘I’ll give her fifty dollars.’ Fred began flashing fingers at the old lady, two hands at a

time, ten, twenty, thirty …

‘Karasho,’ said Igor impatiently, ‘Okay, okay.’ He spoke again, his voice rising, his eyeballs rolling. The old lady muttered another reply and drew her shawl tighter.

‘She want. For tea. No sell.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake,’ said Fred. ‘Listen, for fifty bucks she can buy two of them, electric ones, any kind she wants. Doesn’t she want a nice electric one?’

Nikolai said nothing. He simply snatched up a candle and wagged it in Fred’s face, giving Fred a crazy grin that said, ‘No electricity – isn’t it awful?’

‘Okay, forget it.’

But he wanted his trophy. The faint stamp in his passport CCCP, MOCKBA and a date was not enough. Something substantial was needed, like the bierstein, the rosary, the blue Wedgwood pot. And even if he could not be the traveler who brought home a demure full-breasted peasant girl, he would have his modest souvenir. If not, what was the sense in coming so far? And to Russia, no less.

In silence, the tea was drunk. Fred finished his first. He placed his chipped cup on the floor and said, ‘What about the ikon? I haven’t got all day.’

‘Eekone, yes.’

The three Russian men gathered around the old lady. Igor did all the talking, pointing to Fred and, once, asking the taxi driver’s opinion. While he spoke Fred saw a vivid moment in his mind, a very familiar one: he was back in Cleveland with his pals and they were making a deal. The faces were eager, joshing American ones, reddish, large nosed, rough. The Russians even had crew cuts, the same thick ears and deep wrinkles. They were grinning and pushy-looking in a Midwestern way. They even seemed to be yakking in English!

The sight of the worn carpet, the sheets over the furniture, the coldness of the room, brought Fred back to reality. He was halfway around the world from Cleveland, in enemy territory. He reminded himself to be careful.

The discussion was still going on, the old lady appearing not to understand. She asked many questions and got many shrugs, many gestures, many little sharp cries of admonishment as replies. Then the old lady rose very reluctantly, with sighs, and beckoned Fred into a little room at the side. The room was damp and even darker than the outer parlor. It was hung with heavy tapestries which, when the old lady lit a candle, appeared to be delicately embroidered. The room had the eerie glow of a

chapel; in fact, the candle was in a red glass chimney on a gold-wrought stand. It was a vigil light and could have come from a very large church.

Warming the wax, the candle flared up. Above it gleamed the ikon, a painting the size of an airline calendar, Mary and child with tiny carefully made faces and thin hands. Each head wore a coronet of little sparkling gems; in places there were pocks where gems had been. And Fred noticed that the paint had cracked, the boards had warped, the cloth around the frame had frayed. Still, it was beautiful. The candle flame grew higher, picking out tiny cherubs with trumpets, lilies, roses and fishes, scrolls and, at the top of the ikon, a wordy motto in elongated characters like gold washing hung on a line.

‘Boy,’ said Fred.

‘You like?’ asked Igor. To Nikolai he said, ‘He like.’

Nikolai grunted.

‘Is good,’ said Igor, turning to Fred. ‘Is nice Russian eekone.’

‘How much?’ asked Fred.

‘Is good eekone,’ Igor replied. ‘Not much. Three hundred.’

‘Rubles?’

‘Dollars.’

‘Two fifty,’ said Fred.

‘Okay. Two fifty.’

Fred cursed himself for not saying two hundred. ‘Traveler’s checks?’

‘Is better dollars cash.’

‘I don’t carry that kind of money around in cash,’ said Fred obstinately. ‘So it’s traveler’s checks or nothing. You understand? Traveler’s checks!’

Ignor winced. Fred realized he had shouted in the little chapel; he apologized. The apology seemed to bewilder them more than the offense.

‘Ask her if it’s okay.’

Igor sidled up to the old lady and spoke, flicking his finger at the ikon. At Igor's words the old lady drew away, her back to the little altar, as if protecting it. She clapped her hands to her mouth, stifling a shriek; then, petrified, she wagged her head rigidly from side to side.

'No sell,' said Igor, inexplicably grinning.

'No sell,' mumbled Fred. 'Did you tell her the price?'

'Now I tell.' Igor shot fingers into the old lady's face and, at the same time, brayed numbers.

The old lady lowered her eyes and shook her head in a gentle negative.

Fred understood. 'Not enough, eh? Fine, how much does she want for it?'

The old lady glanced up at Fred and spoke quickly. Her head dropped once more.

Grinning in the manner of Igor, Nikolai blessed himself with the sign of the cross, finishing by kissing his bitten finger tips.

'She wants. For pray,' said Igor.

'What?'

Igor blessed himself as Nikolai had done, but Igor did it with his left hand and cast his eyes up to the ikon. Fred looked at the taxi driver. He smiled sheepishly and did the same.

'What! Are you kidding me? Listen, you people don't pray – it's against the law, for God's sake. Listen …' Fred knew he was talking too fast for the Russians. He tried in broken English: 'Communist no like church. Huh? Church very bad. Praying bad. Priests bad. No pray in Soviet Union. Huh?' His patience was exhausted. He went on angrily, 'So what the hell is this old lady talking about, will you just tell me that?'

Igor got the point. He leered. 'Komsomol no like this.' He clapped his hands prayerfully under his chin and attempted an appearance of devotion.

'Right. Tell her that,' Fred said coldly.

Igor began to speak, but was interrupted by Fred again. 'And tell her,' Fred went on, 'that she'll get into trouble if she keeps on praying, because it's against the law. And you know what that means! Siberia, right? Right. Go ahead, tell her.'

‘Is good idea,’ said Igor. He tapped the side of his head and puckered his mouth appreciatively, as if to say, ‘Good thinking.’ And then he spoke to the old lady. He had not said ten words when the old lady looked fearfully at Fred and sucked in her breath. She seemed trapped, as if the floor of the fragile chapel was about to give way and drop her onto a rock pile. She started to protest, but broke off in the middle of a word and wept. She averted her eyes from the four men in the room; she stared at the frayed carpet and, taking the knotted end of her shawl into her mouth, bit it, the way a person being tortured tries to endure pain. She moaned.

‘Tell her to cut that out!’ said Fred. She seemed to be doing it on account of him, pretending it was all his fault. He began to hate the old lady for making him feel that way. ‘All right,’ Fred finally said, ‘no deal. The deal’s off. I don’t want it! Will you tell her to cut it out!’

Fred was now shouting louder than the old lady was crying. It had a chastening effect on her; her sobbing died to a sniffle.

Igor spoke and, as he did, the old lady continued to sniff. ‘She wants sell eekone very much.’ He winked. ‘Two hundred fifty dollars, American.’

‘But I thought you said –’

‘Wants sell to you,’ Igor said. He stood near Nikolai and the taxi driver. Their faces were triumphantly rosy.

‘Doesn’t she want it for praying?’

Igor translated with evident malice.

The old lady looked at Fred with red eyes full of pleading fear, more fear than she had shown toward the three Russians. Her voice was small, her face puffy with grief, her unusually large arthritic-knuckled hands clenched tightly over her knees.

‘She no pray. She say to me, No pray, comrade!’

In the men’s toilet of the Uyut tearoom Fred coated his hands with slimy Soviet soap and scalded them in the sink while a customer kecked into the commode. At last the customer left. Fred and Igor made the final transaction. Fred passed the traveler’s checks wadded in brutally heavy toilet paper to Igor who reached under the gap in the wall of an adjoining water closet.

Outside, at their table, the deal complete, they touched teacups.

‘Chin-chin,’ said Igor.

‘Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute,’ said Fred, feeling oddly abandoned and fearful. ‘What am I going to tell them at the customs desk at the airport? They’re going to ask me where I got this thing.’ The bundle lay beside Fred’s chair, innocuous-looking in Pravda and old twine. Fred pointed cautiously, then cupped his hands to his mouth and whispered, ‘I’ll get into trouble. They’ll know I changed my money illegally.’ Fred looked to Igor for reassurance. ‘I don’t want any trouble.’

‘No trouble,’ said Igor.

‘What do you mean –’

Igor hushed him; people at other tables had turned to watch the man shouting in English.

‘What,’ said Fred with pained hoarseness, ‘do you mean, no trouble? They’re looking for people who’ve changed their money on the black market. I’m an American, for God’s sake, an American! They’ll lock me up. I know they will.’ Fred was inconsolable. He sighed. ‘I knew this whole thing was a mistake.’

Igor chuckled. ‘No trouble. Tell police this eekone present.’

‘Sure, a present. You’re a great help.’

‘Present, yes,’ Igor said calmly. ‘Find young policeman. Young man. Tell him, heh, you fack Russian gorl. She say, heh, yes, very good, thank you. Gorl give you eekone as present for fack. Easy.’

‘Oh, my God.’

‘Don’t whorry.’ Igor winked. ‘We go.’ He took Nikolai by the arm and departed, leaving Fred to pay the bill.

Fred was upset. Walking back to the Metropole he decided to throw the ikon away and forget the whole business. The decision calmed him, but he grew tense when he realized there was nowhere to throw the ikon. The alleys were bare; there was not a scrap of rubbish or even a trash can on any of the streets. The gutters were being scrubbed by old women in shawls with big brushes. The bundle would be noticed as a novelty (no one threw anything away in Moscow) and would attract attention.

It was all the more worrying for Fred when the elevator operator, a sullen, wet-lipped man in a faded braided uniform, gave the bundle cradled in Fred’s arm a very queer look. Fred shoved it under his bed, downed three neat vodkas and went to the Bolshoi to see The Tsar’s Bride. He had been cheated on the tickets: he sat behind a post in

the sixty-kopek heights, in the darkness, shredding his program with anxious hands.

That night he could not sleep. The haggard face of the old lady appeared in his room. She accused him of stealing her valuable ikon. A Russian policeman with a face like raw mutton tore Fred's passport in half and twisted his arm. Igor, in a chair under a bright light, confessed everything. Nikolai wept piteously and pointed an accusing finger at Fred. Toward dawn Fred lapsed into feverish sleep. He awoke with a vow on his lips.

It was not easy for him to find the old lady's house. The banners were some help in figuring the general direction, but it was not until a day and a half after the visit with Igor and Nikolai – one day before he was due to leave for Tokyo – that he found the right street.

He rapped hard at the gray door, so hard he skinned some leather from his glove knuckles. He soon saw why there was no answer: a heavy padlock clinked in a hasp at the bottom of the door. Turning, Fred was brought up short by a figure on the sidewalk, standing with his hands in his pockets, eyeing him closely.

'Do you speak English?'

'If you zpeak zlowly.'

'Where is the old lady?'

'Not here,' said the man. At that moment a chauffered Zyl drew up to the curb. 'You are friend?'

'In a way. See, a couple of days ago –'

'Come,' said the man darkly.

They drove through narrow streets, then out to the wide Sadovaya that rings Moscow, and across the canal to more narrow gray streets, in the bare district of black stumps and boarded-up houses near the Church of the Assumption in Gonchary. They passed the church and continued for about half a mile over frost heaves in the empty street.

'Where are we?'

'Gvozdev,' said the man, and he gave the driver a direction.

The car pulled in through a low gate cut in a thick stone wall. At the far end of a scrubby courtyard was a sooty brick building, the shape of Monticello on the back of the nickel, a domed roof but with one difference: this one had a chimney at the rear

belching greasy smoke. It was too squat, too plain, too gloomy for a church. Fred pulled the ikon out of the car and followed the man into the building.

The front entrance – there were no doors – opened onto a vast, high-ceilinged room, empty of furniture. The walls were covered with small brown photographs of men and women, framed in silver and set into the cement, not hung. The cold wind whistling through the front entrance blew soot and grit into the faces of people milling about in the center of the room. It was a silent group, apparently workers; Fred saw that their eyes were fixed on three men who sat on a raised platform at the far end.

The three men were dressed in long coats and boots. They all wore gloves. This would not have seemed so strange except that two of the men were holding violins; the third was seated at an organ. They began to play, still gloved, a mournful and aching song.

From a side door two men entered, carrying a coffin which they set in front of the musicians' platform. One of the pallbearers placed a small sprig of flowers on the coffin and touched the wood with his fingers.

'Old lady,' said the man next to Fred. 'She die I am not zurprised. It is formidable how she live zo long in this cold.'

The scraping of the violins and the heavy breathing of the organ continued as the coffin descended into the floor, accompanied by the steely clanking of a hidden chain. The coffin bumped down and out of sight. Two trap doors shot up, met and shut with a bang which echoed in the stone room. When the echo died out the musicians stopped playing and at once began tuning their instruments.

'Say.' Fred turned to the man. He cleared his throat. 'Can you direct me to the Novodevichy Convent?' He said nothing about Svetlana. There might have been trouble. On the other hand he felt sure he would get the ikon past customs now.