

On Being 16 and a Soviet Jew

By Patty Gorelick

Artem, our Moscow cousin, is 16-years-old. His next important decision is not which compact disk to choose nor which rock concert tickets to buy. His mind is consumed with the problems of his family's survival in a crumbling, deteriorating, anti-Semitic motherland. The last program which was scheduled for May 5, 1990 thankfully turned out to be a false alarm despite repeated warnings broadcast on Moscow TV for all Jews to stay off the streets and remain in their apartments. He thinks maybe the next program will be real.

Last January's ruined celebration in a Moscow concert hall also occupies his mind. The prestigious writers' union, April, had planned this party. Some of the members were Jewish. Instead of finding a festive gathering of friends awaiting their arrival, the writers found threatening black-booted, military, uniformed Pamyat. "You're all Jews, get out of our country. Go to your Israel. It is your fault we have no food." The Pamyat men screamed and began beating the writers. Two or three writers managed to escape and call the police. Not that it did much good. It took three calls and over an hour later before the police arrived. Several members of the Pamyat were held for a few minutes and then released. "Everyone knows the KGB is behind the Pamyat," Artem tells us. He next considers the consequences of his being drafted into the Soviet Army, which can happen anytime after his 17th birthday and he mentions that last year 15,000 young Soviet soldiers were killed. Since there was no war, I inquire as to how they were killed. "Older soldiers harass and beat the younger soldiers. Often the beatings go too far and many young soldiers are killed. They especially hate Jews and particularly Moscow Jews." Incredulously after more than 70 years the scenario remains the same for young Soviet Jewish men. They are still trying to leave Russia to avoid being killed by the Russian Army.

The stories I heard from our cousin Artem and his mother Larissa are indelibly stamped on my mind. Twice they have had a Star of David scrawled on their apartment door. The broken glass of their apartment windows cuts through me with a chill. Is this Germany again? Can it be that the Russian Jewish child of 1990 is at this very moment being forced to endure the same cruel anti-Semitic taunts from schoolmates? "You are a Jew and need a yellow star on your shirt. You are against our country. Go to your Israel." I cannot comprehend the fear that prevents Artem from bringing lunch to school because others already think the Jews have more money, more food. Is it possible that in 1990 Artem



L to R: Bill and Patty Gorelick, Larissa and Artem.

and his family are forced to hide in the country for three days because of a threatened pogrom? It is no wonder that this boy of 16 has become a mature, serious thinking man in short order.

Each new day brings more problems. There is no food in the shops of Moscow. "The only things in the food shops are the sales assistants," our cousins relate. Even standing in line is dangerous. At peril of becoming embroiled in a fight, does one risk talking while waiting in line? The mood of the people becomes bleaker with each passing day and the Jews are being blamed for every problem — including Chernobyl. Artem and Larissa had a respite from this grim and fearful atmosphere by visiting with us June 9 through July 11.

We were their hosts and tour guides in New York, Charlotte, Myrtle Beach and Washington D.C. They applied to immigrate to the U.S. last February and we anxiously check our mail each day for a reply from the U.S. government. We have so far heard nothing.

One hot afternoon returning to our car from SouthPark Mall, Larissa told me, "The mall and shops are like a museum for me, I think I am in a dream." We took pictures of Larissa's dream in front of a display of six styles of irons. Never had she seen so many choices of anything.

After a tour of Charlotte Country Day School, Larissa began crying. "I can take seeing all the shops filled with clothing even the ones on Fifth Avenue, but I can't take seeing the wonderful schools." Larissa tells us that her son Artem who is at the top of his class in high school will not be permitted to go to the university because he is Jewish. The claim of Jews not being allowed to attend the university was made frequently by different members of our Soviet family, and since many of them applied and all were turned down despite excellent academic records, I tend to believe it's true. Our cousins tell us that the Soviets believe the Jews are smarter and have better living standards than the rest of the population. By keeping Jews out of the university the Soviets hope to keep the Jews on a lower echelon within their society.

I watched as Larissa counted all the items on the salad bar. She was astounded by the va-

riety and had never seen most of the vegetables. "If this restaurant would be in the Soviet Union, there would be a line two months long," she said as she wistfully thought of her husband Boris in Moscow who could not be with her to enjoy the experience. Artem liked "this system," and found it "very convenient" eating only his favorite foods.

The movie theaters brought exclamations of the "the seats are upholsterd!" Soviet seats are hard wooden or metal folding chairs. In addition, the audience is forced to endure up to one hour of film on the wonders of the Communist system before the movie is shown. The novelty of the candy counter also made a big hit.

The evening at Myrtle Beach we were attending a cocktail party given to honor the 55th birthday of a close friend. There were perhaps 20 guests present, all Jewish, who had known each other for many years. It was a fun-loving, happy group. At the close of the cocktail party while driving to the restaurant for dinner, Artem commented on the joviality of our friends. "When groups of Jews come together at home (Moscow) there is fear in their eyes. There are two subjects always discussed: 1. Will there be a pogrom? 2. How can we leave?" With an aching heart I said a silent prayer for our family and the thousands of other Jewish families who are still living in the Soviet Union.

On one of the last evenings he would be with us, we walked to our car from a Russian class at the Jewish Community Center. As the twilight sky of a warm July settled peacefully and quietly over us, Artem looked around, and wishing for my unattainable world, turned to me saying; "this is paradise." Putting me on intimate terms with what it means to be an American, I knew Artem and his family must be safe in the embrace of our country. Hopefully, we will not be too late.

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