

Halifax Student in Russia

by Alec Bruce

Like most Canadians, I've been nursed on the democratic ethic and weaned by the free-enterprise system. I crave Wheaties in the morning, and rinse twice a day with Listerine. I'm one of the 35 billion who regularly makes the pilgrimage through the golden arches for some of that oh so special sauce. I love animals, small children and the 40-hour work week. I hate taxes, politicians and most cops.

So when, at times, I'm forced to think about the Soviet Union, I instinctively cringe. Visions of Siberia, the KGB and nuclear annihilation dance obscenely in my mind. Words like totalitarian and police-state plague me like hungry dogs tearing at my door. I retreat, meekly, to the warm places of my cool western lifestyle. I return to my feather pillows, my Alpine lager and my Esquire magazine.

Kathleen O'Neil is one Canadian who thinks I've got a lot to learn. This year she spent six months in Moscow perfecting her Russian and discarding her own inhibitions. She describes her experience as simply amazing. "It changes you," she recounts. "When you've never been to Russia, any thought of living there scares you. But, like most people in North America, I was frightened more of what I didn't know than of what I did know."

O'Neil is quick to point out how natural my fears are. I am, after all, the product of exclusively western experience. "It's understandable," she says. "Russian power scares almost everyone. But until you've lived in the Soviet Union for a while you don't really know what's true and what's false. I discovered that reality begins in Russia where the fantasies end."

She even concedes some cherished notions of Soviet tyranny. But she insists I'm not capable of discerning the whole truth. "I have no doubt some Russians spend their winters in Siberia," she explains, "that the KGB haunts many darkened hallways. But ask yourself how many Canadians have actually seen the Russian police in action, or the inside of a Russian prison camp."

I must admit, I haven't come across anyone so splendidly honoured. And this leaves me with a problem. If I can't accept my own jaundiced perceptions or the Soviet Union's official statements, then where do I turn for valid information on life in Russia? I might seek out a Russian defector and compel him to reveal the breadth of his knowledge. But Russian defectors are generally difficult to find in Halifax.

However, there is Kathleen O'Neil.

She's available, knowledgeable and keen to illustrate the depth of my ignorance. We speak the same language and share the same cultural environment. She's one Canadian who's lived and studied in the Soviet Union. She understands my hesitation because she's had to deal with her own.

Travelers always claim their sojourns are preeminently self-revealing. Discovering you're misin-

formed about any culture is humiliating. Your only consolation is that recognizing your illusions, you can properly educate yourself. O'Neil has a message for prospective globe-trotters: see Russia first.

That country will strip you of your fantasies faster than any place in the world, according to her.

"I've been to a few countries," says O'Neil. "In each, I learned a little about the culture and a little about myself. But Russia taught me the most important lesson of my life. I learned that you've got to discard your convictions about people and places if you really want to understand the world. Take your fondest ideals and hang them out to dry."

In Russia, life is hard for everyone.

"Most countries indulge visitors with extensive tourist facilities and comfortable accommodations. Travelers aren't normally encouraged to question their assumptions about the places they visit. In Russia, life is hard for everyone. The tourist will find no shelter from the harsh realities of Soviet authority, or the widespread squalor. I quickly saw it was futile to impose my expectations on a lifestyle that wasn't my own. In order to survive, I had to understand my surroundings. I had to remain adaptable."

Kathleen's adventure began in Halifax. She prepared tirelessly at Dalhousie University, taking courses in Russian art, language and literature. By the end of the 1981 fall term, she had completed over 200 hours of study. She spoke Russian fluently and knew the master-works of Russian culture intimately. She was destined for Moscow and the Pushkin Russian Language Institute.

"It was amazing," she recounts. "After a comparatively short term of study in Halifax, I could read, write and speak Russian. A new world was revealed to me. It was the world of Dostoevsky and Turgenyev. It was a world of mystical imagery and timeless romance. I thought it could be my world for a little while."

Prior to her departure, during the first days of 1982, O'Neil's optimism and self-confidence grew rapidly. She thought she'd thrive in the Soviet Union, immersed in a community of academics. She imagined she'd spend hours with eminent scholars discussing issues in Russian culture. She hoped she'd create friendships that would last a lifetime.

She also expected to emerge from Moscow intellectually and emotionally fulfilled.

"I was prepared, and Russia called to me," she explains. "I left Canada with great expectations. I was convinced I would be productive in the Soviet Union. I wanted to trace the tenuous strands of culture — literature, philosophy and art. I wanted to pursue the Russian gestalt. Where better to do this than in Russia among sympathetic experts? I dreamed of fulfilling the promise of my earlier work."

But the Pushkin Institute was not the discreet community of scholars O'Neil had envisioned.

No fraternity of interest in Russian culture united student and professor. Rather, the institute was a massive training centre for prospective teachers of the Russian language. Her life was thoroughly regimented. She had to attend, with unswerving diligence, a rigorous session of lectures and tutorials. She faced courses in grammar, vocabulary and syntax. Her routines never varied. She took lessons in the same places at the same times, every day, five days a week. She worked from early morning to late afternoon.

"My room was on the 13th floor of the institute building," she says. "I shared it with two other girls. These rooms, by North American standards, were only large enough to comfortably accommodate one in each. Five on our floor shared a bathroom with 6'x6' dimensions. I found these conditions very difficult to adjust to in the beginning."

O'Neil found other, more active, features of Soviet Society difficult to view with equanimity. She discovered the most noticeable aspect of everyday life was the presence of authority. "At the institute," she explains, "there was one person, officially in charge. He was the Dean. But I remember, whenever there was some important business



'I could watch, and learn.'

In Russia, O'Neil's fantasy ended. Her expectations had collided squarely with circumstances. She had no resources or scholarly direction with which to pursue her cherished subjects. Her work at the institute seemed interminable.

However, she faced her inevitable situation and got down to the business of everyday life. She followed the rules and kept out of trouble. She resisted the temptation to excavate cultural treasures from under the edifice of Soviet national pride. She learned to adapt to her environment.

"The bubble had burst," she recalls. "In only the space of a few weeks, I knew I had been naive. I expected that with my mastery of the Russian language, I could do almost anything once I found support and aid in an academic community. But life as an institutional woman made my personal goals unattainable. I settled for what was possible. I could watch, listen and learn. I could follow regulations and be quiet. I could strive to understand contemporary Russia from my own special vantage."

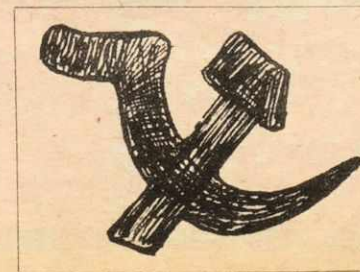
But the process of adaptation was slow and often painful. Many facts about Russia offended her western sensibilities. The widespread squalor and characteristic lack of space in Soviet dwellings made her first months in Moscow particularly uncomfortable.

to be concluded, there was always another fellow who would temporarily take over. He was the shadowy figure, of which there were many in Russia, who would put his stamp of approval on everything."

"Classes were rigidly controlled," she says. "I attended formal lectures where no conversation was allowed. Even during the scheduled discussion periods — times when 'special topics' were probed — there was a noticeable oppression. Whenever controversy was introduced in the conversation, the professor immediately apprehended it and redirected the topic. One always felt the long arm of authority."

In time, O'Neil acquired a resilience which carried her through the difficult moments. She learned she was a survivor. For, indeed, she did survive. She learned that much of what disturbed her in the beginning was in fact part of her reluctance to part with her own convictions about how people should live.

She learned to accept the strangeness of her circumstances without exaggerating the importance of her discovery.

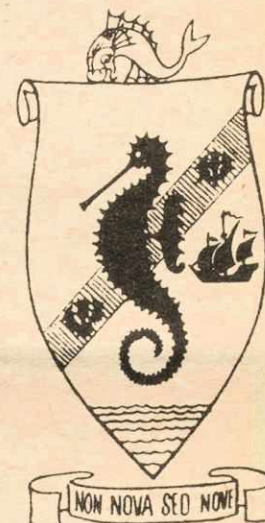


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