Back from Russia, with love

It was 60 degrees, below zero in Moscow's long, dark, bleak winter. Even darker was Russia's mood amid massive street demonstrations and violent rollbacks of Gorbachev's glasnost reforms. My American staff had been sent home and I was left alone to manage our TV news bureau with a handful of grim Russian helpers. I was enveloped in the gloom.

Almost every night came these brightest dreams of my hometown—though I had not even once visited Santa Barbara for some 15 years. I could see myself floating atop a beachside cliff, bathed in the blue, blue, blue of the salt sky echoed on the Pacific below. The Channel Islands framed the scene. I couldn't have been more wowed by a vision of heaven.

I hadn't thought much of returning to Santa Barbara. My home house was in Washington, D.C. My career was rooted. But I knew then if I was to stick through the Russian ordeal, there was a reward waiting.

And as I now look out at the Channel Islands on this crystal day from my desk top home, I believe even more in prophetic dreams.

And now I have another dream for Santa Barbara. A vision that somehow we can use our unique blessings to serve as a beacon for others. Not as a beacon for where they could be, but for what they might be.

Santa Barbara is especially chosen for this role, for better or worse, whether we accept it or not. For the last several years, nightly and prime time on millions of television screens across Central and Eastern Europe, the soap opera named for our city has been a consistently top-rated program. Ask a Russian who's never been beyond her home village to name an American city. If it's not New York, San Francisco or Chicago, she'll say Santa Barbara. Many Russians make pilgrimages here to compare us to their mythical image. I've met them on the street.

Fame carries a price. People look at you harder, pattern themselves by your example. Let's let our famous city and bounteous blessings be worthy of more than a crop of tourist dollars. Let us show how we can fill all the finer aspirations of the human heart. Let us demonstrate that all the great stirrings of our root can take root and flourish, even if in a single city. Let us hear our departing guests say, "Oh, that's how life can be! What can we do to make our own town so?"

When I returned from covering Russia's second revolution, I was a frequent speaker on the sad state of affairs in the former Soviet states. Almost invariably, some kindly audience member would ask, "What can we do to help?" I would respond the best thing we, as a country can do is to serve as an example, where a nation can survive and thrive on fair and honorable trade, where corruption isn't the rule of the day.

And Santa Barbara, we can even do more.

— Steven R. Van Hook, Santa Barbara
Ukraine journalist takes a brave stand

It is inspiring to see the News-Press give such prominence to the presidential election farce in Ukraine. Though a world away, there are many lessons for us to be learned here.

I got to know the Ukrainians well while living there for four years, producing media campaigns on social and economic reforms. They are a people with big hearts and an incredible patience.

It seems that patience has reached its limit with the fraudulent election of an old-guard oligarch. However, the “defeated” reformist has rallied hundreds of thousands of an inflamed public to the frozen winter streets, standing strong for the true heritage of a proud and worthy people.

One brave television journalist, signing the news for a deaf audience during a national newscast, ended her segment by flashing a bright orange ribbon around her wrist — the color of the reformist opposition — and signed that everything in the newscast had been a lie.

“Yushchenko (the reformer) is our true president!” she signaled as she said farewell to her viewers, knowing the all-too-common bloody end of journalists who challenge the system.

Instead, hundreds of her previously cowed media colleagues embraced her courage, and began chanting to their shaken managers: “No more lies, no more lies.”

The power of the press gets a free ride on the power of the people.

When the media, as the embodiment and guardian of the public’s right to know, gets off its can and stands with the truth, then tyrannies will finally fall.

Steven R. Van Hook
Santa Barbara
Editor
Santa Barbara News-Press
August 30, 1998

It's a true joy to regularly browse the News-Press online and catch up with the news from
my native home, while I've been working in Ukraine so many thousands of miles and
decades of development away from idyllic Santa Barbara.

Much of your news seems so remote from the fundamental issues we face each day here in
Kiev in the revival of a demolished nation. Other of your stories feel right at home: small-
town news with a global resonance.

So it is with the Isla Vista "3-strikes" plan, booting repeat rowdies out of local parks. A
park groundskeeper's unenviable frustrated summation: "Enough's enough. We've tried to
be nice to them, but what are you going to do?"

Indeed, that is the question. What do we do with those living on the edges of our
civilizations, those who refuse to abide by our societal rules?

This is an issue freshly highlighted in fluorescent hues, now that our embassies abroad --
small lonely pieces of American soil in rolling seas of discontent -- are under ever more
violent attack. For better or worse, our embassies represent the hand of America
reaching out to the world. A stab at our embassies is a stab at our heart. And now the
very Heartland of America itself is in incalculable peril from all too potential terrorist
threats of nuclear, biological, chemical and even cyber attacks.

Yes, Mr. Park Groundskeeper, what are we to do?

Sure, we can raise the barricades, and shift the undesirables even farther from our fine
shores, or simply exterminate them. In some cases, that may be the only unfortunate
resolution. Though let's not call this a solution, but an ideological defeat. And readily
accepting defeat is just not the American way, as I see it from this vantage point some 180
longitudinal degrees away.

The world looks hard at America, certainly for what we are, but also for what we hope to
be. It's a position that requires tremendous responsibility, whether we accept it or not.

What are we to do?
1) We must provide that everyone who wishes to enter our figurative “civilization” is granted a door to do so. It makes no sense to issue an invitation to the castle if the drawbridge goes unlowered. If we cannot do this in a spirit of goodwill, let us at least do so in enlightened self-interest, knowing we shall not escape others’ misery and wrath.

2) We should maintain unflagging patience and resolve in our course. So many people live in worlds so removed from ours — even in our parks — it may take them much time to conceive such a golden society is even possible for them too, let alone plot the course to get there.

3) Let us ensure ours is a society worth aspiring to, where the ideals we profess are the same ideals we produce by. We must dust off musty assumptions, peer beyond our boundaries of comfort, and while counting our foes take stock of our own flaws.

We may shrug at such simplistic generalities as way too mushy to grip, especially when immediate fallout is in our face. But as world travelers know, when we become confounded by the constant compass changes navigating the terrain, it’s the general heading that finally gets us home.

And we must be wary of a proclivity to associate suppressing the symptoms with rooting out the cause, while the disease fester into a malignancy infecting the entire body politic.

In the wise words of Uncle Remus, “You kin hide de fire, but what ya gonna do wid de smoke?”

Steven R. Van Hook
Kiev, Ukraine
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Empire in Transition

A newly aominous greeuve, a new and ominous atmosphere descends on the Russian terrain. People must brace themselves for the changes that lie ahead. The old order is crumbling, and the new one is not yet in place. The transition is a difficult one, but it is necessary for the country's future.

The author visited his friend, a prominent Russian journalist, and found him restless. The friend had written extensively about Soviet history and culture, and he was now reflecting on the consequences of the collapse of the Soviet Union. He spoke of the need for a new political system that would be more just and equitable. The author was struck by his friend's realism and optimism, and he encouraged him to continue writing about these issues.

The author also visited a small village in the countryside. He was struck by the poverty and hardship that many people in the region faced. The village was surrounded by fields and forests, and it was evident that the economy was struggling. The author spoke with some of the villagers and listened to their concerns. He was moved by their resilience and their determination to improve their lives.

In conclusion, the author felt that the transition was a difficult one, but it was necessary for the country's future. The challenges were formidable, but the rewards could be great if the country could overcome them. The author hoped that the new government would be able to build a better future for the Russian people.
Glimmers of hope on Russia's horizon

There is a Russian word—"kholodno"—which means something far more powerful than the English word "cold." It carries a tinge of dread, a foreboding that something terrible is about to happen. It was this word that I heard often during my extended assignment in Moscow over the final months of Gorbachev's rule in 1988-89. Russians young and old used it to describe their dreams, hope and visions amid the turmoil and uncertainty.

It was a cold, dark, dream. The most basic of life's essentials were difficult to come by. Food was scarce; billions of people were hungry. Life savings vanished overnight. Any hope that remained for reform had been shattered by the training of a new generation of politicians. A new generation of politicians that was not interested in reform and freedom.

Weeds once again populated the streets of Moscow. The atmosphere of corporate office closed on TV news bureaus facing for my staff's safety. I returned home despairing for Russia's future.

But there was again in Moscow, just weeks ago, watching the military ring in the new Parliament building. The circumstances seemed all too familiar. There was that very same structure—the White House—once sheltered Boris Yeltsin's nascent democracy from the old guard, who now stages their own constitution. The new Constitution was passed after the resignation of the first secession from the Supreme Soviet, who now stand in front of the new building and cheer their success.

Once again, it seemed to be a defining moment dividing Russia's future from its past.

Yet just half a mile outside the perimeter of all this turmoil and media hype, the Russian mood was one of relative calm. People were enjoying their new freedoms and the benefits of democracy. They spoke with their hands and views now with the day-to-day difficulties of existence.

"I'm a patriot, not to my country," said Oleg, a young Russian who joined me for dinner with his new bride. "My allegiance is to my family, to earning money, to finding food, to taking care of my own. I have no time to think of anything else."

This is the new Russia, the young Russian Federation, in which the Soviet Union stood for so long. It is still not perfect, but it is a step in the right direction. The new leaders of Russia recognize this, and are working hard to bring about change.

The Dec. 12 election throughout Russia for a new Parliament body will be truly democratic and reform-minded officials are brought to power. Everywhere you see signs of successful entrepreneurship. Citizens of Russia are now able to participate in the decision-making process, and their voices are being heard. The new Russia is one of hope and promise.
Что "накопали" ревизоры?

Вчера заместитель заведующего отделом Контрольного Управления Президента Российской Федерации А. М. Ляпунова, возглавлявший специальную рабочую группу, ознакомил губернатора Б. Кузнецова и его ближайшее окружение с результатами двухмесячной деятельности в регионе.

В информационных кругах считают, что "ревизоры кое-что накопали". Даже начальник информационной службы Прокуратуры Михаил Тихонов, отмечая, что "доклады несут трудный характер". В ближайшие дни руководство областной исполнительной власти должно представить в Контрольное Управление Президента объяснения по искривлено в ходе проверки факту.

Депутаты всех созывов, объединяйтесь!

В минувшую субботу в Перми урочились Ассамблеи депутатов Пермского округа (АДП). В новом, добровольном объединении входят более 30 бывших депутатов разного уровня. В их числе и весьма знаменитые: Б. Кощеев, А. Насыров, А. Белорусов... Интерес к новой общественности проявлен и некоторые из выступавших депутаты Законодательного Собрания и Пермского городского Совета.

- Наша главная задача - заработать три новых конференции бывшему члену областной, профессору химии университета Г. Хадееву, - сказал Пермский областной Совет народных депутатов В. Черепанов, а его заместителям были выданы ценные монеты Щетинкина Г. Хадеева и В. Бабушкина.

Синим пламенем

От месторождения, идущего в этом году в сырье, в Пермском крае, произошел взрыв. Было вызвано гибель более 40 человек. В городе Чайковский, где произошел взрыв, в настоящее время проводятся поисково-спасательные работы.

Коротко

"Падший резиденция - ключ к успеху" - такова тема семинара, организованные в рамках штаб-квартиры в Центре Пермь. Организаторы семинара - Крига - независимой неправительственной организацией США.

В прошлом году институт уже проводил в Прикамье региональную конференцию по вопросам технологии политической деятельности. На этот раз семинар предназначается для специалистов бизнеса и политической сферы, поддерживающих связь с общественною. Проводит его профессиональный американский журналист Стивен Вас Хук.

В Перми прошла конференция регионального отделения партии "Следующий шаг" в Москве,

Свеча в патроне

В субботу в Перми произошло событие, какое-то во всей стране СНГ еще не было - открытие памятника работе, погибшим в Афганистане.

Среди троих памятников, воздвигнутых в столицу, вдоль дороги к парку имени Советской Армии, снимали снега. Между тем, война уже лет десять, Питомцу на поле, в трех раз больше погибших.

Тысячи пришли на открытие памятника. Приехал в Пермь брат А. Б. Насырова из Афганистана, Армении, Узбекистана, даже из Прибалтики. Молились везде память погибших.

На чью ставим,

Пермь

Несмотря на достаточное большое население города на окраине города и в окрестностях, автостоянка ведет медленно. На сегодняшний день лишь одна из двух запланированных остановок. Впрочем, руководители города едины в стремлении сгладить данную проблему. Несмотря на то, что на данный момент не все машины имеют возможность стоять на автостоянках, тем не менее, mieszkańцы продолжают приезжать на работу на автомобили."
To the Editor:

I read with bemusement your coverage of former U.S. Ambassador to Romania David Funderburk's presentation to the John Birch Society in Arroyo Grande, where he asserts the August coup in Moscow was an elaborately staged plot between Gorbachev and Yeltsin. Such questionable suggestions from such a seemingly credible source as the former ambassador cannot go unchallenged.

As a journalist who has followed developments in Moscow for a number of years and lived there for six months just prior to the coup, I met and covered Gorbachev and Yeltsin on several occasions. I can assure Mr. Funderburk these two leaders were anything but the best of buddies involved in such a scheme. He would receive similar assurances from any number of his knowledgeable colleagues working at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, including the esteemed former ambassador John Mattock, or current ambassador Robert Strauss.

Mr. Funderburk says his suspicions of conspiracy were further aroused when he saw video of Pizza Hut delivering 300 pizzas to the crowd protecting the Russian Federation Building. "How serious is this coup?" he asked. Perhaps Pizza Hut knew if the coup succeeded, it could have been one of the first casualties. Did Mr. Funderburk miss the video of the brave men, women, young boys and girls standing nose to nose with tanks — the defending victims crushed beneath the wheels of armored vehicles?

Are the widespread suffering and despair among Russia's masses also part of the scheme solely to elicit western aid and passivity? If the so-called conspirators were so clever to pull this off, it's hard to believe they couldn't have come up with a plan clever enough to tap their country's vast supply of resources and talent to avoid this mess in the first place.

While Mr. Funderburk's Cold War rattlings may be good for generating headlines and speaker fees, they do little to further a true understanding of the situation as it exists.

Steve Van Heek
Lompoc
Moscow traveler: Yeltsin a ‘buffoon’

By Jack Magee
Assistant Staff Writer

LOMPOC — Russian leader Boris Yeltsin is not likely to last long, a former television reporter in the former Soviet Union said Thursday.

Lompoc native Steve Van Hook, who said he once interviewed the leader for two hours, called Yeltsin a “buffoon” who is not nearly as good a statesman as Mikhail Gorbachev, who survived last summer’s attempted coup only to be deposed by Yeltsin.

“I don’t think he will last the year out,” said Van Hook, who recently became governmental issues director for the Santa Maria Valley Chamber of Commerce.

“I don’t think he’s the figure we’ll be dealing with in years to come.”

Speaking to the Lompoc Valley Chamber of Commerce monthly luncheon at the Dollar Bill Restaurant, Van Hook largely read from notes he made during two stays in Moscow, the first for six months in 1990-91 and the second for a month, leaving just a week before the August coup.

“This is no time to be bullish on the Russian bear,” he said, painting a bleak picture of life in the post-communist country as well as during the previous decades.

Military security, once so tight, is now so lax that he photographed a jet warplane without interference.

“Either they weren’t watching or they didn’t care,” Van Hook said. Under the old regime, he said, he could have been shot.

Van Hook said he went to the Soviet Union for six months in 1990-91 for the Sun World Corp., returning for a shorter visit in July “to find the situation even worse.”

He had taken two years of Russian language years ago in college.

Sprinkling his speech with anecdotes and observations, Van Hook related that:
* A 25-year-old Russian entrepreneur commented that “The world owes our country much for demonstrating that communism doesn’t work.”
* “Russia is not a very happy country” and his first sights in Moscow “turned my stomach,” with a meat market displaying “half heads and carcasses, birds and bugs” with “raw, salted fish” a common meal.
* “Russians do love flowers,” selling them on almost every street corner in Moscow.
* In Moscow now, a crowd of 10,000 people is now considered merely a demonstration.
* He mostly ate eggs and ice cream. Russian remedy for a cold, he said, is “Raspberry jam and honey — and lots of vodka.”
* “If you sneeze, the Russians say, ‘Your next statement will be truthful.’”
* He tried but failed to explain the American high school prom phenomenon to Russians. The people there couldn’t relate to it. One woman told him she had seen few happy days in her 30 years.
* Soviet physicians were amazed when told the money American doctors might make. Soviet doctors made only 200 rubles a month.
* He left for Moscow on Sept. 29, 1990, from Dulles Airport in Washington, D.C., in the company of departing Soviet diplomats, “wade, chubby stewardesses” on a “tattered plane.”
* “The most important thing before going over there is to develop an understanding of the people.”
* Soviet families are closer than American ones, several generations maintaining close contact. Those who migrate miss their homeland terribly and have trouble adjusting to our stricter education standards.

Although born in Lompoc, Hospital in 1958, Van Hook said his family then was living in Buellton. He attended Bonita Elementary and Santa Barbara High schools and the University of Oregon in 1986.

He worked for a weekly newspaper, then returned to college and got his degree in 1986. He then switched to television news, working in southern Oregon and California before getting the chance to go to Moscow.
Steven R. Van Hook of Worldwide Media Relations in Lompoc is traveling to Russia to hold a series of seminars in St. Petersburg, Perm and Saratov on effective public relations in business and government.

The trip is sponsored by the Kriebel Institute, a non-profit Washington, D.C., organization that has been sending volunteer American business people to countries of the former Soviet block since 1988.

Van Hook is a Santa Barbara native, and has worked in print and broadcast media for 15 years, including positions as anchor and news director for an NBC affiliate and bureau chief of a Moscow television news service.

Van Hook attended Santa Barbara High School and Santa Barbara City College, and he earned his bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Oregon.
LAST FALL, MOSCOW

A FIRST-PERSON LOOK AT AN EMPIRE IN UPEVAL.

BY STEVE VAN HOOK

For 12 years I've dreamt of myself as a reporter in the Soviet Union. I worked two and three jobs at a time to put myself through journalism school at the UO. I followed the developments in Moscow, brushing up on my Russian as able. My first reporting job was as a volunteer at an Oregon Public Radio station. From there, I became a television news reporter, then bureau chief, then a news director and anchor — all the while with an eye on Russia. Finally, after years of working and waiting, I am employed as executive producer for a Moscow-based television news bureau.

My notes begin the day of my arrival.

September 30, 1990: Touchdown in Moscow after a final approach over a Russian birch tree forest. I could swear I heard church bells! A friendly exchange of gifts with my Soviet surgeon co-passenger (I brought some cheap Snoopy pencils, he has some cheap Soviet lapel pins), and a two-hour wait at Sheremetyevo for my ride to show up. A quick tour of Moscow: Red Square, the meat market, the Arbat Street shanks and pickpockets, the first of many Russian meals of raw salted fish. Then my two-bedroom apartment with two balconies in the center of the city near the Kremlin (a prestigious home) — and sleep.

October 3: Three scenes have turned my stomach in somersaults since I've been here: the Russian meat market (half-heads of carcasses of unidentifiable creatures hang proudly on display while picked at by birds, bugs and carefree shoppers) and the KGB Lubyanka prison just down the street from our office (home of the infamous torture chambers and midnight death wagons). And the prissy women's journal publisher here to announce a Russian version of her magazine soon to be available on Soviet kiosks. Angry women surround her, yelling that articles on high fashion and gourmet recipes are not welcome in a city where they can't afford to buy potatoes. The magazine's dinner reception at the four-star Savoy reminds me of the scene in Doctor Zhivago where inside all was fine and festive, while beyond the warmth bedraggled Russians trudged along the street, hoping to survive the winter. I step outside, feeling more comfortable with them.

October 6: After two hungry days while I learned to find food, I think I'm adapting. With chunks of instant milk (floating in my instant coffee beside my bowl of tepid instant oatmeal, life looks luxurious. The military here is everywhere, on every corner, riding the trains and the streetcars, walking to work, living in regular apartments, not separated on bases apart from the civilians. It's hard to believe they would shoot on their own people, know them and their hardships. "Oh yes, they would shoot," says Yelena, my cynical Soviet ladyfriend. We interviewed Russian Tsarist Prince Andrei Golitsyn, who had brought out his finest rarities of crackers and chocolates and whiskey, an impoverished sad-faced man with ambitions of somehow regaining power. We snacked beneath the portraits of old Russian nobility, the subjects of a nostalgia resurgence in Moscow. I said to CBS reporter Jan Chorlton-Petersen, "I feel a little guilty about having so much while so many Russians have so little." Her reply, "If you feel guilty here you will never survive."

October 10: A ride in a motorcade! To tape Gorbachev in the Kremlin, only a few feet away! Such a palace! The
The fine furniture! The efficient KGB guards! My intent interest made them especially wary. We’re covering John Phalen, the New York Stock Exchange CEO, meeting with Soviet officials hoping to establish their own stock exchange. “A stock market is not the answer,” says Phalen, “it is a mechanism to the answer.” He adds, “Money comes from heaven, but we spend it on earth,” I like that. “This is not a time to be bullish on the Russian bear,” said one stock exchange official, befuddled by the overwhelming work ahead to bring about a free market system. One reporter observed, “Most Russians are concerned with stocking their markets rather than marketing stocks.”

October 12: I’ve been visiting Soviet offices we deal with to see how they work. My impression: They don’t. Never have I seen so many people making so much noise while accomplishing absolutely nothing. Supports my hypothesis that the degree of results one achieves is inversely related to the amount of noise one makes while doing it.

October 25: Today we taped about 200 Pentecostals camped out at Sheremetyevo airport after, at the last minute, they were denied exit visas to the U.S. by the Soviet government. Hand-washed clothes hung from the rails and blockades. Mothers cried at us that their children were denied access to the bathrooms. Our camera followed one father and his daughter — because of that the guards let them pass to the toilet. The Pentecostals were persecuted here, in part, because of their odd habit of speaking in tongues clustered and prayed and refused to leave the building, afraid they wouldn’t be allowed back in. Some had been waiting for 10 years to get out of the U.S.S.R. What became of them? I don’t know. The “news” had moved on. Also today at Sheremetyevo we covered a Hollywood/Soviet joint-venture movie being shot on an Aeroflot passenger jet at the end of the runway: Icons, about drug smugglers in Moscow, starring Roman Polanski. A Russian played a Marine, an American played a Soviet soldier. The drabness of Moscow suddenly became theatrical, surreal. Art is much more palatable than life.

October 28: On a high, slow, single revolution of Gorky Park’s giant Ferris wheel overlooking the city skyline and the Moscow River, I kissed the lovely Russian woman beside me at the top of our turn, telling her I’d remember the kiss each time I spied the wheel, visible from many parts of the city. Such talk has little effect on the Spartan women here. She did glow, however, at the wedding ceremony in the Russian Orthodox cathedral, and the rich Italian ice cream with a shot of something alcoholic on it at the “Mezhy” left her “truly contented — a rare feeling in Moscow,” she said.

October 30: During today’s solemn memorial march at a newly dedicated stone from one of the Stalinist prison camps, old and young Russian fingers held up pictures of the many thousands dead at the hands and guns of the Soviet Committee for State Security, the KGB. “Lord forgive us, Lord forgive us,” the choir sang. A soothing, melancholy, amplified voice recited the names of the dead as thousands marched. A crush of people like a handshake squeezed the breath out of me. I was warned that in such a crowded one mistake, a trip, could mean a trampled death. Ahead of our surge (I was helpless to move any way but one) was a patch of weed-flowers. “Save those flowers!” a babushka yelled at me. I held up my boom mike as a spear and gently said “svetly” (“flowers”) to the incoming flood of people. “Oh, tevlo,” they replied, and parted around me. From behind, CBS Bureau Chief Barry Petersen commented I deserve the “Order of the Flowers” award. The Russians do love their flowers, one of the few products in abundance here.

November 1: Everything in Moscow works just fast enough to keep you from turning murderous or revolutionary, but slow enough to keep you demoralized and lethargic. The lines, the phones, the bureaucrats.

November 4: My limited knowledge of Russian sometimes gets me into trouble. Like the time our cleaning lady was tearfully telling me her daughter (a ballerina) had either died, or had left for Iraq. I wasn’t sure of which. I fumbled for an appropriate response. On this evening, I was having dinner at my home with Natasha — a young, beautiful, witty, educated, blue-eyed Russian who speaks very limited English. In my poor Russian, I was telling her a joke I’d heard: “A man goes into a market and asks the keeper if he has a scale. The keeper says, ‘Yes, do you have any food?’ ” I didn’t know the Russian word for “scale,” so I pantomimed it. She grinned, paused, and then asked to see my dollars. My face twisted in surprise. I repeated it to make sure I understood what she was asking. “Yes, please let me see your dollars.” (Prostitution is rampant in Moscow. A recent survey revealed 70 percent of high school girls would consider prostitution for hard currency.) She knew my thoughts — “How could I have been so mistaken about this sweet, lovely lady?” — and she laughed. She took my dollar and pointed at the Treasury seal with the scales of justice — the word I hadn’t known in Russian. I blushed, excused myself for a horrible mistake, and excused myself outside for a cigarette to fihy habit I’ve resumed in Moscow, mostly for self-defense. Everyone here smokes. You can’t escape it.

November 5: Moscow is a little like South Africa. A privileged class from abroad with its hard currency, catered to by special shops, hotels, restaurants. Guards at the door ensure no Russians get by (unless it’s one of the prostitutes who shares part of her take). I feel dirty whenever I visit one of the beriozki (hard-currency only stores). One American Embassy worker told me at a party, “They created this awful system, why should we suffer?” Another American says, “Damn right I use the beriozki! Especially the ones that take only credit cards — keeps the Russian mafia goons with their hard currency out.” One Russian friend says,
Those who are guilty for our system feel no shame, why should you? You are not to blame," says another Russian, "if it wasn't for Westerners, we'd have no such places... fine examples for us to see and aspire to." My pessimistic Russian ladyfriend says, "I think we will never have such wonderful things for ourselves - we just won't." Natasha, who resents hard-currency shops, consoles me, "What are you to do? Starve?" I wonder what rationalizations they use in South Africa.

November 6: The towering Foreign Ministry, Ukraine Hotel and Moscow University buildings, the Kremlin, Saint Basil's Cathedral, the church onion domes, the city streets - all lit up so bright tonight on the eve of the Russian Revolution celebration. Such a beautiful city it can be! Such a shame every other night of the year it's kept so much in the dark.

November 8: At a cheap B-grade movie about the life of Jesus at a typically crowded Russian theater, my dazed girl companion cries untypically, saying for 73 years God has been exiled from Moscow, but now He is welcomed back with such longing.

November 10: Today we had an hour-long interview for the BBC with Boris Yeltsin (President of the Russian Federation) and perhaps the next leader of the Soviet Union) at the "White House," the Federation headquarters. I have a hard time fathoming why this bufoon is so adored in Russia, while Gorbachev is held in such low regard.

November 11: Russia has perfected the circus. All the performers and stage hands move in well-coordinated efficiency, a rare encounter in Moscow. Acrobat lions and tigers and bears, barely clad women, Cossack horsemen and an endearing clown perform with a live band and technok light show. Rather than a standing ovation, the Russian audience applauds in rhythmic unison. "Circuses and soda pop will mortify the masses," my Machiavellian friend in the States used to say.

November 12: The Russian ruble is basically worthless and somewhat bewildering. There are three exchange rates: the business rate of roughly two rubles to the dollar (the rate I used on my American Express card, which I brandish only in the berioza store for hard-to-find items like eggs and orange juice), the six rubles to the dollar tourist exchange rate, and the black market rate of 15 to one (my driver with "good connections" makes the exchange for us at the Ukraina Hotel - home of the Moscow mafia). A very large meal at McDonald's for two runs 50 rubles, or about $3.50 (that's a quarter of the average Russian's monthly wage of 200 rubles, such as my surgeon friend makes). Doctors advise people to beware of radioactive rubles and kopeks from Chernobyl, and not to carry them in their front pockets.

November 14: Moscow has the largest McDonald's in the world ("because we're a hungry country," says our bookkeeper, Natalia) and certainly the longest McDonald's line - on a weekend the wait is four hours for a "fast food" meal. Lunch is like a trip to a distant world, where people are friendly and helpful, floors and tables are clean, food is identified as something other than "meat," life is bright and musical. My Soviet lunch partners are mesmerized by the glamour. Russians don't care much for the food, but love the fantasy.

November 15: I suppose it's easy for me to remain hopeful about Russia's future. I have my American passport and visa for an escape of my choosing. I have a pocketful of hard currency - my meal ticket for the food-starved winter ahead. How will I feel if I were stuck here for life, no hope of America's abundance ever again? Would I be one of the countless drunks pacing the streets at all hours and temperatures? Riding the crowded subway, I too despair.

November 21: At my neighborhood benizka, a Soviet state-controlled TV (Gosteleradio) crew burst in to tape the wide assortment of products available to Western shoppers with credit cards. One Russian clerk told them to get out. The Soviet producer snapped back, "We have permission - don't forget your place!" and pointed the camera at me. This video ought to ruffle a few Russians. Nearby, a long line waited for sausages at a state food store.

November 25: Big problem: I think I'm falling in love with Natasha. Her sadness is beginning to seep into my psyche; such a pathetic life in Moscow. What to do?

November 27: Last night a thief broke into our Volvo parked just outside my door. He broke a window and was evidently chased off by the car alarm; there was nothing inside worth stealing. "I'm so sorry for my people," says Oleg. "You are a guest here. Our criminals are very cruel.

As I vacuum up the glass on the ground from the broken car window, Oleg comments a Russian would never clean up after himself like this. "That doesn't seem very socialist," I reply. "Yes it is," says Oleg. "A Russian doesn't see it as 'his' mess, but as 'our' mess - something he is not personally responsible for."

November 28: I tried explaining to the high school prom to Natasha after American girls getting ready to go popped up on the home video we were watching: the rich bedroom, the beautiful white dresses, the stretch limo waiting outside, the boys in tuxedos, the gaggles and gaiety. I feel a horrible loss for Russian children who never know such frivolity. They surely know they are missing out. Their frustrated, hungry lives, their haunted eyes. What is to blame? Government? Russian idocy? Natasha says she's lived but a few happy days.

December 5: Russians love intimate gatherings; friends and family huddled around a small table adorned with breads, meats, liquor and the ubiquitous samovar (a large ornate pot of hot water - an ancient symbol of hospitality). Conversation is cordial yet intense, usually covering the western taboo topics of politics, religion and love. Drinking is vigorous; it's considered bad manners not to drain your glass after one of the plentiful and poetical toasts. This
evening my Russian coworkers and I stood shoulder to shoulder around an office desk munching on bread, meat and chocolate, sipping cognac, celebrating the 50th birthday of our cleaning lady, Zoya. Our talk: how difficult it was for her to find these meager morsels. (Unlike the American custom, it is the duty of the Russian birthday celebrant to throw his or her own party.)

December 9: Today I visited Lenin’s Mausoleum. He looks too real to be real. The head of Gosteleradio was fired when a guest on a talk show suggested Lenin be buried. Many Russians suggest it nowadays. Lenin along with Communism.

December 16: As I wrap it up in Moscow, Natasha tells me I’m like a dream: a brief sweetness, then you wake up to reality the next morning and it’s gone. I tell her I believe dreams are closer to ultimate reality than life is; maybe that’s why I like sleeping so much. She tells me she’s afraid to dream, afraid to hope. I tell her I will try to arrange a visit for her to America, a promise I hope to fulfill.

December 30: The desperate food shortages in Moscow have intruded on my relative margin of comfort. The lines at the beriozka stores have grown long — mostly Russian mafia and prostitutes with their ill-gotten “salvatory” (hard currency) buying up luxuries like liquor and chocolate. Even the checkout line at the “credit-card only” beriozka wraps around the store. For eight days I’ve been unable to find eggs and ice cream (my main staples). Yet Zoya, our cleaning lady, gifted me a New Year’s bottle of Hungarian champagne, Lord knows how she found or afforded it.

January 3, 1991: Today I shot the raising of the flag at the new Israeli consulate, the first time the blue-and-white Star of David has flown in Moscow for 23 years. Since I was shooting for Israeli Television, they cleared the Consul General’s office of the crowd of correspondents so I could have an exclusive interview. The look on the reporters’ faces as they were ushered out — especially CBS’s cocky Jonathan Sanders — was worth all of my hardships here. As the video was fed over the Gostel satellite uplink later in the evening, I could hear the Jerusalem control room workers cheering as the flag was raised and the Israeli national anthem was sung. The new consulate expects to process 400,000 Jewish emigrants in 1991, likely draining yet more of the educated and skilled workers from Russia.

January 5: As part of the move toward a market economy, the Soviets have stopped subsidizing “luxury items” like car parts, furs and (gas!) beriozka stores. The prices have doubled since the first of the year when the change took effect. A dozen eggs now costs me about four dollars. Every night lately I’ve been having dreams of home — the same vivid dreams I used to have about Moscow.

January 7: It’s officially Christmas Day in Moscow. Yeltsin proclaimed it so after he was petitioned by the Moscow Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church; Gorbachev followed suit and declared it a Christmas holiday in the republics as well. It’s the first Christmas in Russia since the Revolution. No one seems to know how to celebrate it, but everyone is enjoying the day off.

January 10: Russians are an interesting combination of extremes: unrestrained greed and self-promotion countered by expansive philosophical and soulful depths — each trait honteously real and straightforward. In comparison, Americans appear in an in-between middle, often frosted in bullshit. I’m not sure if it is the Russians’ self-centered side that has fostered this ineffective system, or the horrible Soviet system that has advanced the “get-out-of-my-way-and-give-me” attitude. I do know that a self-serving approach to life (so pervasive here) inevitably leads to mistakes as one misses the greater perspective available to a more transcending viewpoint (enlightened selfishness, the New Agers call it). By looking out only for one’s self, one misses the bigger picture of one cooperating within the context of all else; a necessary awareness, I believe, for true enduring success. Fascinating how the national and individual personalities reflect each other.

January 24: My departure has been delayed long enough for me to witness the collapse of Gorbachev’s perestroika and glasnost. Newfound press freedoms have been restricted in response to critical coverage of the Baltics’ repression. As of the first of February, Gorbachev will assign the military to patrol the streets of Moscow — ostensibly to “protect the people from hooligans,” but more likely to protect the Kremlin hooligans from the people. In an alleged crackdown against black marketing, Gorbachev has recalled 50- and 100-ruble notes (about one-third of all Soviet currency in circulation). Citizens throughout the Union were given three days to turn in their rubles under very strict guidelines and KGB supervision. The new rules allow an exchange of up to 1,000 rubles of the large notes, but many people here have amassed savings of tens of thousands of rubles over decades, stashed under mattresses and hidden in dark corners, waiting for the day when there might be something worth buying. Stunned laborers, farmers, pensioners, family men and women stand in long bank lines, terror in their eyes as lifetimes of work and savings are snatched away. Fury and frustration hang in the air as a flammable gas. I fear an igniting spark is imminent.

Steve Van Hook ’86 is a freelance television producer in the Washington, D.C., area. He visited the Soviet Union again this summer (where he found the situation still “dreadful”) and asked Natasha to come to the U.S. She has failed so far to obtain a visa.