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Looking for Anya X

By Bill Steigerwald

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People exploring the Soviet National Exhibition in Los Angeles in November 1977. **Bill Steigerwald**

Anya was not a happy communist travel agent.

It was Nov. 17, 1977. We were eating an inexpensive lunch together in the crowded cafeteria at the Los Angeles Convention Center in downtown LA.

I was a 30-year-old divorced bartender and freelance journalist living in Hollywood. She was married and living in New York, where she was a guide for Intourist.

Anya Ryukhin was one of 200 lucky bureaucrats, public relations specialists and KGB agents who had been sent to sunny southern California to staff the Soviet National Exhibition, a massive Cold War propaganda show that took over the convention center from Nov. 12 to Nov. 29.

Only 28, Anya was already a privileged citizen of the Soviet Union. Smart, personable, youthful as a schoolgirl, she was blessed with an easy smile and thick dark hair that piled up

on her shoulders. Born in Moscow, a straight-A graduate of Moscow State University, she spoke English better than I did.

Since 1973 she had been working for Intourist and living in Manhattan with her husband, who worked for the Soviet mission to the United Nations. I had become friendly with Anya on the first day of the exhibition by taking photographs of her and her more businesslike sidekick, Tanya, as they worked in their information booth.

During our lunch Anya and I exchanged life stories and avoided East-West politics. She was in good spirits until she began telling me how little fun and excitement she was having in the entertainment capital of the "Free World." After two weeks, she had seen virtually nothing of Los Angeles' nightlife, tourist attractions or famous beaches.

Picking at the remains of her fruit salad, saying she felt "empty inside," she looked like she was going to cry. She wanted to go out to a jazz club. Most of all she wanted to see the Pacific Ocean — and swim in it. They were two things I did all the time, I told her.

And she wanted to go out by herself or with Tanya, not on a tour bus with a dozen comrades and security chaperones, which was how she had seen Disneyland and the starry mansions of Beverly Hills.

But she knew an unsupervised night on the town was impossible. She and her colleagues were forbidden to leave their motel at night unless they went with a boss. Her boss was a real nice guy. He knew how miserable she was and he sympathized. But he didn't have any free time in Los Angeles either.

Anya was disappointed, frustrated, emotionally worn out. She was being treated like a child — or a prisoner. All she wanted were some good memories to take home with her. All she had were memories of work and a Holiday Inn hotel room.

When I said I wanted to help her in anyway I could, Anya surprised me. She said she might be able to sneak out of her hotel late at night. It sounded like a great idea to a fun-loving libertarian like me. I encouraged her to try it.

And I told her that if she could escape from her unhappy outpost of the Soviet Union, I'd pick her up in my tiny $1,000 red 1960 MGA sports car and take her wherever she wanted to go.

Bill Steigerwald / for MT

Anya Ryukhin keeping an eye on the Intourist booth at the Soviet exhibit.

Part of the reason Anya was so unhappy during our lunch was her punishing work schedule.

For the previous five days, from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., she had stood behind an Intourist information booth at the Soviet exhibition, smiling sweetly, handing out pamphlets, answering questions and explaining what ordinary life was really like in the Soviet Union under Leonid Brezhnev.

The exhibition was the first of its kind in the U.S. since 1959. It was a major news event in a town known for movies and rock 'n' roll. Heavily protected by police and primitive metal detectors, it was besieged each day by hundreds of anti-Communist protestors and activists from across the political spectrum.

Demonstrators waved Armenian and Ukrainian flags, held up "Free the Baltic States" signs and shouted epithets like "Bolshevik Murderers." Socialists, Jews and "Save the Whales" environmentalists pushed newspapers, pamphlets and fliers into the unwilling hands of disinterested Americans.

The exhibition was free to the public. It was designed to impress Americans with the glorious scientific, industrial and cultural achievements of 60 years of Communist Party rule, but it often looked like an unintentional self-parody of the Soviet Union.

It was a crazy jumble, half government science fair, half flea market. Shiny Soyuz spacecraft, Kosmos satellites and arts and crafts from Russia's 15 captive republics shared the floor with silk-screened banners celebrating the fall of the tsar and scale-models of shopping malls, hydroelectric dams and BN-600 fast neutron reactors. There were few consumer items — television sets half the size of American refrigerators and piles of poorly printed travel brochures for places like Armenia and Ukraine.

Though crudely ideological and a fat target for derision, the Soviet exhibition was grossly over-praised by the Los Angeles Times as "splashy" and "seductive."

Apparently the newspaper didn't notice the dearth of consumer goods, the fixation on industrial production statistics or the huge silk-screened banners carrying Orwellian slogans like "Guaranteed Employment for Everyone," "Space Serves Peace and Progress" and "The Welfare of the People is the Goal of Socialism."

The exhibition's main brochure itemized how many lives, towns, villages, mines and large factories the heroic Soviet Union had lost in World War II. An Intourist handout aimed at potential foreign travelers to the U.S.S.R. included useless statistics about electric power capacities, rolled ferrous metal output and 10-year plan goals.

The best example of how helpless the Soviet Public Relations Ministry was in trying to appeal to Americans was a cheap 32-page booklet containing a speech that Leonid Brezhnev had recently given at a Communist Party gala marking the 60th anniversary of the "Great October Socialist Revolution."

Unrolling a string of wrong predictions, Brezhnev droned on and on about the political accomplishments of the party, the superior socioeconomic achievements of socialism and the already clearly evident death spiral of capitalism.

The Soviets made another PR mistake when they scattered guest books around the exhibition space for visitors to write in their comments. Many entries were naive love notes to the Soviets for their dogged pursuit of mutual East-West understanding.

Other Americans could see through the Soviet smokescreen. "Very interesting, but stupid," one wrote. Several quipped, "This is almost as impressive as the Berlin Wall." Another asked,

"No toaster, no microwave?" Another wondered where the SAMs and AK-47s were. One wise guy said, "Your planes kill more people than any other airline in the world — so do your disastrous space missions. P.S.: Lenin needs a hair transplant."

While I was copying down these all-American comments, a deadly serious Soviet staffer asked me what I was doing and expressed concern that I was taking down names for "the police inspector." "No," I told her. "I'm writing a newspaper article, and I thought some of the entries were really funny."

I showed the woman the "Berlin Wall" quip, but she didn't laugh. "I don't like that humor," she said. "It is not friendly."

She disappeared but returned with the deputy manager of the exhibition, who somehow managed to be even more humorless. As I explained myself and asked him a few innocent questions, the woman picked up the guest book and took it away.

For those seeking sanctuary from the onslaught of Soviet-style boosterism, there was a small, somber but powerful counter-exhibition on the convention center's second floor.

It had been mounted — despite formal complaints lodged by Soviet officials — by Soviet Jews to protest the denial of their human, religious and political rights in the Soviet Union. Called "Soviet Jewry: Six Decades of Oppression," it focused on the plight of thousands of "refuseniks," the Soviet Jews who were denied the right to immigrate to Israel and elsewhere.

Little more than panels papered with black-and-white photographs and letters from refuseniks, it told the stories of the Soviet Jews who filed for exit visas and subsequently lost their jobs, had their apartments taken away and were sometimes dispatched to the gulag. It drew 62,000 visitors, 30 at a time.

For the next few days, while I hoped Anya would find the courage to risk a night of illicit freedom in Los Angeles, I played journalist/spy.

I went across the street from the convention center to the Holiday Inn, where two Soviet security men in bad suits sat in the lobby pretending to read newspapers.

The hotel manager said the FBI ordered him not to tell anyone how many of the "Russians" were staying there (nearly all 200 were) or what floor they were on (the seventh).

He said the guests were quiet, polite, patient and well-behaved. They didn't loiter in the lounge and definitely weren't allowed to go out at night.

A maid on the seventh floor said the Russians were neither especially clean nor dirty, and — despite the stereotypes — they didn't do any heavy drinking or partying in their rooms.

If this were a Russian fairy tale, my story would end with Anya sneaking out of her motel room, us dancing till dawn in the surf at Zuma Beach and then falling in love and living happily ever after under assumed names in Malibu.

If this were a bad American TV docudrama, it would end with me helping Anya defect, getting

in a shoot-out with KGB assassins on the Santa Monica Pier and creating an international incident that discredited the Soviet propaganda show and hastened the collapse of the evil Soviet Empire.

But this is a true story.

The Soviets National Exhibition — an unflattering but accurate microcosm of the U.S.S.R. and its sociopolitical and economic failures — was deemed a success. It drew 310,000 people in 18 days and closed without any acts of violence or a single defection.

I went on to become a modestly successful newspaperman at the Los Angeles Times and two Pittsburgh newspapers. As for Anya, she never did have to risk sneaking out of her motel.

Her boss finally responded to her lamentations about being tired and unhappy in Los Angeles. He let her go back to New York early. And before she left, he took Anya to the Universal Studios movie lot and to the beach at Santa Monica, where she got her wish and swam in the Pacific.

I said goodbye to Anya Ryukhin on Nov. 21, 1977, on my final trip to the convention center. She wrote her name and New York business address on my notepad and later I mailed her some of the best photos I had taken of her. She never wrote back.

Six years ago I tried to find her. I Googled Anya's last name, visited web sites in Moscow and sent e-mails asking for help from people at Moscow State University, The Moscow Times and Sistema, the private company that now owns Intourist. No one responded.

At the Moscow bureau of the Los Angeles Times, reporter Sergei Loiko did some checking around for me, but it only deepened the mystery. According to Intourist's personnel records, Loiko said, no person named Anya Ryukhin ever worked at Intourist in the 1970s or later.

So did Anya befriend me, tell me details of her personal life, expose her fragile emotional state to me and consider sneaking out of her hotel to meet me for a midnight joyride — and then give me a phony last name? Maybe, but not likely.

Today Anya would be 64 years old. I don't know if she lives in Russia or even if she's still alive. I don't know if Ryukhin is her last name. Was it her maiden name? Her alias? Was she KGB, as her husband probably was?

Anya has become my personal "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." For obvious personal and journalistic reasons, I want to find out what became of her. Maybe someone in Moscow who reads this will tell me. But for now, Anya's trail is as cold as the global propaganda war that brought us together for lunch in Los Angeles.

Bill Steigerwald retired from newspapers in 2009 and lives in Pittsburgh. He is the author of the Amazon.com *e-book* "Dogging Steinbeck," *which exposed the fictions and lies in John Steinbeck's classic 1962 travel book "Travels With Charley."*

Contact the author at newsreporter@imedia.ru

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