

Travels with Cornelius

1989

The Fall of the USSR

Moscow, Tbilisi, Tashkent, May 4 to 26, 1989

In the Fall of 1988 Sagdullah Bakhranov invited me to give a seminar on my work at Tashkent University. I accepted under the condition that Cornelius would be invited too on his own merits. He had finished a research paper on the laser-detection of sickle-cell anemia at Berkeley. This request being accepted I pulled a few strings in Moscow and in Tbilisi and got us invited there too.

This journey was a historically singular opportunity to watch the collapse of the Soviet Union with our own eyes. We arrived in on May 4, 1989. In Moscow a new Duma was being convened. In Tbilisi 20 young women, who had demonstrated for Georgian independence, had been murdered by troops of the Soviet Ministry of the Interior a week earlier. Nobody would predict what would happen in Central Asia. There was a high tension in the air that kept us awake day and night and followed us on our flights.

The journey was organized by Prof. Prokhorov, because my long-standing mentor Prof. Basov had been voted out of the directorship of the Academy and that of his institute and was hiding at home. The Academy paid for both of us (I paid for Cornelius' flights to Moscow), in exchange Cornelius gave a seminar.

Everyone felt highly insecure because of the rapid changes under Gorbachov. For that reason we were chaperoned by senior members of Prokhorov's institute, Victor Apollonov and his wife Zoya to Tashkent and Samarkand and Ivan Shcherbakov and his enigmatic wife to Tbilisi. All four were friends of mine.

Moscow



Sveti Cornelius, the Lightman from another Planet, Moscow 1989

We had a week full of events and happenings: A visit to a modern art show with Leonid Mikheev and his Lithuanian first wife. Genya Koudriavtsev's son presented Cornelius with a pair of blue jeans his girlfriends copied by the dozen for sale. We met Peter and Yura Grigoriev at Natasha's one night - and hitch-hiked back to our hotel at midnight. Cornelius visited the Institute of Atomic Energy, while I invaded the Institute of Spectroscopy. Noemi Kempe flew in from Berlin especially to meet us and took us to a memorable performance of Chekhov's *Seagull* at Stanislavsky's old MkhAT. To please Cornelius Natasha organized tickets for a ballet evening at the Bolshoi. We explored the Kremlin one late afternoon on our own - and in the last sunlight I took scores of photos...

One day Vialyi Zuev took us and Natasha to Svinigorod and his dacha - where the above photo and the following were taken.



Cornelius' view of Natasha, Rolf, and Vitalyi in Svinigorod



Cornelius and Vitalyi at the datcha



Cornelius blowing the horn

In retrospect, if I search my memory of this visit for any enthusiasm among my friends on these many intense meetings in Moscow, I come back empty handed. I recall a feeling of high tension and an expectant gloom, but little creative innovation and no hopes for the future.

Tbilisi

Tbilisi would provide the mind-shaking experience of this visit.

We sat around at Domodedovo airport in Moscow for a considerable time waiting for our flight. Ivan was very quiet, his sphinx-like wife never said anything anyway. I attributed Ivan's silence to his poor English and his stuttering handicap, but he was also visibly uneasy. Was it the unwelcome burden of being responsible for our wellbeing, the universal Russian fear of Georgia, or something else? .

We were surrounded by a noisy group of Chinese men chaperoned by a Russian interpreter. Cornelius listened to them and asked whether he could talk to the Chinese. Ivan nodded reluctantly. The surprised Chinese soon clustered around Cornelius. He had a grand time.

On the plane we came to sit next to an older gentleman. Because of our poor Russian, a trilingual conversation ensued in which Cornelius would speak Chinese to the interpreter who would then relay our questions to our neighbor in Russian. We learned that the man was Georgian, and was the Tbilisi guide for the Chinese delegation. Now Cornelius tried his Georgian on him, confessing that he had never learned the conjugations. Shaking his head in disbelief, the Georgian began giving him an introduction into Georgian grammar— which took up most of the two-hour flight to Tbilisi. When we landed I asked the

gentleman for his card. As profession it said "Gipnotizër". I had to read it aloud before I comprehended that he was a Hypnotist. I had to suppress a laugh, but the man confirmed my reading. However, we were not prepared for Tbilisi. Merab and Sophie, who had come to the airport, were in shock and agitation. On the ride from to our hotel I pried the story from her in German which the others did not understand. A week earlier 20 young Georgian girls on a peaceful sit-in for Georgian independence on the stairs of Government House had been massacred during the night. Some had been gassed and others had been brutally cut down with spades by troops of the ministry of interior.... Merab suggested that before we drove to the hotel we should pay our respects to the victims.



Their pictures were on display at Tbilisi Sioni, the Church of the Georgian Patriarch in the old part of town.



The silent Shcherbakovs, Nino, and Merab

Tactful as only Merab could be, he proposed to drive Ivan, his wife, and us to Kazbegi. But even there we could not escape the tragic mood. Every village on our way was flagged in black. As a kind of atonement we climbed the steep hill to Mtatsminda Zameba, this time including Merab. The day was beautiful. The mountain was unusually clear. Cornelius, sitting in a meadow of Caucasian Spring flowers drew the scenery.



Cornelius drawing the church of Mtatsmeba Zameba below Mt. Kazbeg

One evening Sophiko took us to her sister's house. After dinner the two sisters drew us aside. In hushed voices they told us that Inga, the blond daughter of the house had for several years suffered from excruciating headaches. She was 24, a pediatrician, and lived with her husband, also a physician, in Moscow. A month ago a Moscow oncologist had diagnosed her with a brain tumor. Could we call a specific Georgian cancer specialist in Los Angeles and ask him for an independent examination of Inga. Of course, I offered my help, but knew that the Los Angeles physician was not interested in taking on such an involved case and probably a penniless patient.

Returned to Los Angeles I tried, but never could get past the Georgian's secretary. Then at 3:00 AM one night a dissolved Sophiko called to tell us that Inga and her husband were on their way to LA. They had found a Russian-Jewish emigrant doctor who had offered to admit her as an indigent patient into the LA County Hospital and perform a biopsy. Would we take care of them....

A nightmarish week followed, too long to tell. The excellent physicians at that rat-infested hospital found a large, spread-out cancer in her brain, which could not be operatively removed. Doped with heroine, which her husband had bought on the black market, Inga was flown back at the expense of a fortune. She died eight months later in Tbilisi....

Merab invited us to a farewell dinner at his house. The large color TV ran all during dinner, a well-known, female Georgian film director was giving a speech at a conference on the details of the Tbilisi massacre. I have rarely seen an angrier person on TV, and never anyone haranguing the Soviet Establishment more outspokenly. She spoke Russian, and we did not understand her words. It was not necessary. - The Georgian delicacies were forgotten, everyone sat glued to the screen.

It was then that Gia Tarkhan-Mouravi took Cornelius and me outside onto the balcony and unburdened himself. "This massacre was Gorbachev's latest attempt to reign-in Georgia." I intimated that he was overstating the case. Why should Gorbachev dirty his hands with such a brutality? "You don't know the Russians," countered Gia. "The Soviet empire is falling apart. Gorbachev has his back to the wall. The night attack was planned for two days. Gorbachev must have known of Rodionov's intentions and given his blessing. Gorbachev is a murderer, and Perestroika are idle words, a smoke screen for the West. You noticed that the US government has not condemned the massacre with one word, an intentional misjudgment—to please Gorbachev." I wagged my head, what could I say? Gia raised his voice. "I tell you, this blood bath will be the end of Perestroika, of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party, and Gorbachev."

He would be proven right. Within a year the Berlin Wall came down, Eastern Europe was free, and Central Asia and the Baltics had split from the Union. Gorbachev was powerless to stop this process. He would be given the Nobel Peace Prize by a grateful West, but then stumbled over the abolition of the Communist Party. And Georgia would, for the second time since 1917, declare its independence from Russia,

overwhelmingly elect Gamsakhurdia as president and—within another year—skid into a terrible, humiliating fratricidal war...

Tashkent

We flew to Tashkent with the Apollonovs in an Ilyushin 96M, the latest Soviet wide-body plane, a huge boxcar with a cabin twice the height of a 747. Everything would have been fine, had I not have eaten some spoiled meat at lunch the day before. I had to use the emergency bag twice, and Zoya was very concerned. I knew it would pass by itself, if I ate nothing for a day.

Uzbekistan was dead quiet, deeply entrenched in an old-style Communist hierarchy. On a dinner invitation at Sagdulla's house his wife asked me, "Why should we want to change the System? Especially we women owe our freedom, our education, and our position in society to the Party. Look at me, I earned a PhD! We are for keeping this institution. The men flock to the mullahs—and the mosques are full, only the Party has protected us from Islam." Her husband smiled sheepishly, and her sister volunteered to sing a patriotic song for us.... I often think of this harmonious gathering when I read the deplorable news from Uzbekistan today.

I had asked Sagdulla whether he knew an old Sufi, I had many questions to ask about early Sufi history in Samarkand. He revealed that we would, arranged by the Uzbek Academy, have a special audience with a highly educated Sufi—the foreign minister of the Mufti of all Islam in the Soviet Union. The Mufti himself had been elected as the Uzbek representative to the Duma and was in Moscow. It would be an official meeting which would also be attended by the director and members of his institute and some Russian correspondents. Not exactly what I had envisioned. Cornelius and I put together a number of questions to ask, and I rehearsed the interview during the night before.

The place was a large hall in the Tashkent Medrese, the only Islamic school in the SU and the official residence of the Mufti. We were introduced to the 70-year old man—I have forgotten his name—a bent-over sage with the white beard of a Hadji and a kind countenance in an unassuming Moslem cassock, hands clasped on his back. My entourage had swollen to some fifteen notables who sat in rapt expectation around a long table.

I let the Sufi open the interview. He asked in Uzbeki for my health and journey, what questions did I have in mind? My interpreter translated into English and another into Russian, and a scribe jotted down every word. I asked for the origins of Sufism. Many of the orders had their birthplace in 12th and 13th century Samarkand—his own ancestor was one of those. They were Sunni, later Sufism also spread among the Shiites. He confirmed that he was Sunni, which prompted me to inquire about the existence of radical fundamentalists—mostly Shiites—in Uzbekistan. He admitted to fundamentalist currents in Uzbekistan, but by and large they had no difficulties with radical elements here. He was decidedly against fundamental Islamic radicalism, words he directed as much at the Russian scribe as at me.

I dropped, as inappropriate, a question about the revival of Islam during World War II, and asked him whether he would answer some personal questions. Why not, he was married, had three adult children, and several grandchildren. I complimented him on his large progeny and his luck of being a Sunni. He smiled. But what I was interested in was his educational background—and that question produced a surprise. He had two doctorates, one from Cairo University in Islamic studies, another from Moscow in comparative languages. I bowed my head before such a learned man, and he, with a smile, almost slipped into English....

I had already suspected that he understood my questions long before they were translated. Yes, he admitted, he had also studied French in addition to Arabic and the local languages. We adhered to protocol and the use of the interpreters. A few cautious questions about his expectations for the future received vague, standard Soviet answers.

I formally thanked him for his patience and time, and he escorted me, bent over, his hands clasped behind his back, as far as the great gate of the Medrese and wishing me a good journey and many interesting answers to my curiosity, he shook my hand.—My companions were impressed, and I was glad to have survived this diplomatic exercise in style.

The Academy flew us to Samarkand and there offered me the choice of an excursion to Pendikent or Shahr-i-Zabz. I chose the latter because of Timurleng's Ak Seray there.



The ruins of the huge Ivan of Timur's Ak Seray (White Palace)



Zoya, Victor, Sasha Popov, Sagdulla, two guides, Cornelius



Rolf and Cornelius

photographed by Sasha Popov who had flown-in from Krasnoyarsk to meet Cornelius

On our flight back a group of police officers suddenly appeared and demanded to see the identity papers of every person in the overcrowded plane. Victor became very tense, but could or would not explain what was happening, the police obviously searched for some person. They were not interested in the two foreigners. At Sheremetyevo, when we disembarked at night, the process was repeated. An ambulance, engine running, waited next to the plane. We never did see the wanted person being apprehended.... A dissident? An Islamic "freedom fighter"? Victor shrugged and rushed us out of the airport.....