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MOSCOW 2042



V L A D I M I R V O I N O V I C H

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

MOSCOW 2042

VLADIMIR
VOINOVICH

Translated from the Russian
by Richard Lourie

With a new afterword by the author

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A B C D E

ALSO BY VLADIMIR VOINOVICH

The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin

The Ivankiad

In Plain Russian

Pretender to the Throne

The Anti-Soviet Soviet Union

The Fur Hat

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

Unfortunately, I don't have access to my notes. All my notebooks, pads, journals, and all the odd scraps of paper were left behind. There was only one slip of paper, crumpled, worn, and ragged along the edges, which had worked its way into the lining of my jacket and was returned to me by Frau Grunberg, the proprietor of our dry cleaner in Stockdorf. I could make out the following on one side of the slip: "4 sm. U nag. T.t.L.O.L." On the other: "Tomorrow or never !!!" The meaning of the tomorrow business is perfectly clear to me, and I will explain it in due course. But what does the writing on the first side mean? I can't remember for the life of me what the four "sm." could be or what the other letters could possibly signify.

For some reason, what intrigues me most is the second letter "L." Does it designate a thing, a person, an animal? It doesn't rouse the slightest association in me.

And it wasn't that long ago that my memory was perfectly excellent. Especially for figures. I always knew the number on my passport, work card, discharge papers, and my Writers' Union card. Believe it or not, I never make a note of people's phone numbers, I know them by heart as soon as I hear them.

But now? . . .

Now, sometimes it even takes a congratulatory telegram to remind me it's my birthday.

Still, I have no other choice but to rely on my memory.

I can easily foresee readers being mistrustful of this book and saying: This is too much already, he made it up, it couldn't have happened. I'm not going to argue whether it could have, but I will be most definite in saying that I never make anything up.

What I describe here is only what I saw with my own eyes. Or heard with my own ears. Or what was told to me by someone I trust greatly. Or not that greatly. In any case, what I write is always based on something. Sometimes it's even based on nothing. But anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with the theory of relativity knows that nothing is a variety of something and so you can always make a little something out of nothing.

I think this is sufficient reason for you to have complete confidence in this story.

It only remains to add that there are no prototypes for the people described in this book. The author has drawn all the main and minor characters of both sexes solely from himself, ascribing to them not only his imaginary virtues but the real shortcomings, faults, and vices that nature so lavished on him.

CONVERSATION OVER A MUG OF BEER

This conversation took place in June 1982.

Scene of the action: English Gardens, Munich.

We were in an open-air beer garden. *We* means myself and an acquaintance of mine by the name of Rudolf, or Rudi for short. His last name was impossible for a Russian to remember. It wasn't quite Mittelbrechenmacher, nor was it was quite Machenmittelbrecher. Something of that ilk, not that it matters. Personally, I just call him Rudi.

We were sitting facing each other, with Rudi somewhat blocking my view. But, squinting my eyes a tad to the right, I could see a lake gleaming with sunlight; fat geese and naked Germans wandering along the shore. Actually, they probably weren't just Germans, but exhibitionists of all nations who had descended on Munich to take advantage of the local police's permissiveness, to see and be seen.

We were drinking our beer from quart mugs, which are called a "mass" here. To tell the truth, I'm not exactly sure whether it's the mug itself that's called a "mass" or the amount of beer it contains. Not that it matters. What matters is that we were sitting in a beer garden, drinking beer, and talking about whatever came up.

I think the first topic was horses. That's because Rudi owns a stud farm. He breeds horses and sells them to millionaires. Incidentally, he's a millionaire too, not that that matters either.

Though he deals in horses, his greatest interest is high-tech. He drives a luxurious Jaguar packed with all the latest electronics, and the set-up he's got at home is a whole other story. Computers, stereo televisions, automatic doors, just for starters. At nightfall the lights in his study go on automatically, but only if there is someone in the study at the time. If he leaves, the lights go off immediately. (Rudi claims that this device saves him at least four marks a month on electricity.) Needless to say, he has a musical computer that can synthesize the sounds of organs, violins, xylophones, balalaikas, and a host of other instruments, separately or all together. So, using one finger, one man can now perform a work that used to be the province of large orchestras.

Rudi is so fascinated by all this technology that I don't think he reads anything but technical journals and science fiction. He hasn't even read my books, although he does display them prominently and always brags to his other horse-world friends about having an unusual friend, a Russian writer.

He tells me (even without having read me) that I write too realistically, realism being a thing of the past. To be honest, such ridiculous opinions infuriate me, and I am always telling Rudi that his horses are also a thing of the past. But if some people still have need of horses, there still must be some use for a literature that depicts life as people really live it. People are much more interested in reading about themselves than about robots or Martians.

I had just said this to him in the beer garden where we were sitting. With a condescending grin, Rudi replied that we should compare the sales of my books with that of the average science-fiction writer. "Science fiction," he said self-confidently, "is the literature of the future."

That statement exasperated me. I ordered another mass and said that science fiction, like detective stories, is not literature but tomfoolery like the electronic games that induce mass idiocy.

But the warm sun, the cold beer, and the local way of life were not conducive to passionate argument. Not letting himself be caught up in my excitement, Rudi made a casual objection and mentioned

the name of Jules Verne who, he said, unlike the so-called realists, foretold many of the scientific achievements of our time, including man's flight to the moon.

I replied that foretelling scientific achievements was in no way the task of literature and that there was nothing original about Jules Verne's predictions. Every person has imagined space flight and underwater travel at one time in his life, and many ancient books described similar wonders long before Jules Verne.

"That may be," answered Rudi. "Still, science-fiction writers have not only foreseen technological discoveries but the evolution of modern society toward totalitarianism. Take Orwell, for example. Didn't he predict in detail the system that exists in Russia today?"

"Of course not," I said. "Orwell wrote a parody of what already existed at the time. He described a totalitarian machine that worked perfectly and could simply never exist in a real human society. Take the Soviet Union—its population only displays an outward obedience to the regime; in fact, people have nothing but contempt for the slogans and catch phrases. They respond by working poorly, drinking heavily, and stealing left and right. Big brother is the target of ridicule and the subject of endless jokes."

It should be pointed out that nothing could be more boring than to argue with Westerners. When a Western person sees that someone feels strongly about some point of view, that it is very important to him, he's ready to agree with it on the spot, which is not at all the case with Russians.

My quarrel with Rudi was fizzling fast and he was nodding agreeably, but I felt like heating it back up. And so I said that science-fiction authors have made up many things that have come true, but they have also made up things that will never come true, for example time travel.

"Is that so?" said Rudi, lighting a cigar. "You really think that time travel is absolutely impossible?"

"Yes," I said, "that's precisely what I think."

"In that case," he said, "you're very much mistaken. Time travel

has already moved from the realm of science fiction into the realm of fact."

Needless to say, we were speaking in German, and, at that time, 1982, I did not have a very good command of the language (not that it's so much better now). And so I asked Rudi if I had heard him right, that technology now existed that made it possible to travel from one point in time to another.

"Yes, that's right," confirmed Rudi. "That's just what I'm trying to tell you. Today you can go to a travel agency, buy a ticket for a certain sum of money, and board a time machine for the future or for the past, whichever you prefer. By the way," he added, "at present the only such machine in Germany belongs to Lufthansa. The idea is a very simple one, technically. What's used is an ordinary space plane like the American shuttle, equipped, however, not just with simple rockets but with photon engines as well. When the craft achieves sufficient velocity to break free of Earth's gravity, the photon engines are switched on. In the second stage, the craft breaks free of the Sun's gravity. After that, it develops a speed almost equal to the speed of light, and time stands still for you, though it continues on Earth. When you land, you end up in the future. Or else the machine can generate a speed faster than the speed of light, and then you outpace time and end up in the past."

I was already a little tipsy from the beer, but I still had my wits about me and said, "Hey, cut the crap, will you? You know full well that Einstein proved it's impossible to achieve the speed of light, let alone exceed it."

Rudi finally lost his composure, spat out his cigar, and banged his mass on the table, something I never expected to see from such an even-tempered person.

"What Einstein said has been obsolete for years," he pronounced. "Euclid said that parallel lines never intersect and then along came your Lobachevsky and said that they do, and both of them were right. Einstein said that it's impossible and he was right, and I say that it is possible, and I'm right too."

"Listen, listen," I said, "don't go overboard. Naturally, I re-

spect you”—when I’m drinking I respect everyone—“but still you’re no Einstein.”

“That’s true,” agreed Rudi, “I really am no Einstein. I’m Mittelbrechenmacher, but I should also say that Lobachevsky was no Euclid.”

Seeing that he had become extremely worked up, I said at once that in the end it didn’t matter much to me who was the smartest one (Einstein, Lobachevsky, Euclid, or Rudi) and that I was ready to make practical use of modern technology, but was not interested at all in the laws on which it was based.

Which is in fact the case. I am writing these very notes on my word processor. I press the keys and the words appear on the monitor. A few other simple hand movements and the printer prints out those words. If I want to shift a few paragraphs around, the machine instantly does my will. If I want to change all references to Mittelbrechenmacher to Machenmittelbrecher or to Einstein, the machine can do that for me as well.

I use my electric razor, radio, and television every day of the week. Am I really obliged to know the theoretical foundation on which all those things operate?

I asked Rudi if he had flown on that time machine himself. He said that he had, and that once was enough for him. He had wanted to see the gladiators fight in ancient Rome and he had ended up in the arena himself and barely got out in one piece. Since then he had preferred to see such wonders on television or read about them in books.

Of course, I didn’t particularly believe him, but then he said I could easily check the reality of time travel myself. All I had to do was pay a visit to his friend Fräulein Globke who worked in the travel agency at 5 Amalienstrasse.

“Still,” said Rudi, “there’s little chance you’ll ever do any time travel.”

“And why is that, may I ask? You said yourself that it’s moved from the realm of science fiction to the realm of fact.”

“Yes,” he said with a grin, “yes, that’s right. But the price of