

A NIGHT IN THE WHITE HOUSE

We were never actually in the White House - it was more like spending the night on the front lawn except instead of grass it was a concrete plaza. There was no memorial to Lincoln but plenty of other monuments to characters best forgotten. It was not really a formal inauguration but when the night was over it represented the most monumental change of administrations and systems in our lifetime.

You probably were there with us through the medium of TV. We were not really invited guests – unless the appearance of my friend Sasha in the Peking Hotel represented an invitation. Sasha was a renegade in every sense of the word and among other things he operated a private printing press. In fact he had a press that I had sold to him – if selling is the right term for something that was never paid for. Sasha showed up around sunset on Tuesday – there were few reliable systems of communication other than showing up where you thought the person of interest might be – so Sasha appeared at our door. He asked if I would go to the White House with him since he expected that something would happen during this particular night. We were in the third day of a monumental revolution – really two revolutions since the group in the White house was rebelling against the group in the Defense Ministry which had taken over from the group in the Kremlin – and the Great Leader was being held against his will in the Crimea.

Sasha had used his press to print leaflets calling people to gather and defend the second revolution against the first as well as providing food and supplies to the crowd inside the barricades. He commented simply that “if they capture the White House tonight they will come for me in the morning – so I may as well be there “. He then added – “and you should be there with me.” I had my own reasons for considering such an invitation. My parents had both lived through the Revolution of 1917 and watched their comfortable world fall apart. Both families had lost all of their earthly possessions. My father’s side escaped with their lives and little else. My mother’s family was less fortunate and half of the family ended up in Siberia or one of the ‘stans’. Some ended up in prison camps and others never survived long enough to reach any of those destinations. My mother’s story was the stuff of adventure novels and she had actually walked in the 1930 Red Square May Day parade in front of Stalin (without permission) and then escaped with two other fellow University students through China and eventually to America. She had seen the beginning decade of this nefarious regime and I wanted to see its end – how often do you get the chance to be part of history? Except that we did not yet know how history would record that evening.

Lee was in the hotel with me and asked what I expected her to do if I left to join the revolution – sort of the French Revolution without baguettes and stirring ideals. I helpfully suggested she could stay alone in the Hotel or join Sasha and me in the crowd at the White House. She was

not about to hang around the Peking Hotel alone all night in the middle of a Revolution and decided to join us – her presence was actually quite helpful.

The Peking hotel was a pleasant and well-located edifice by Moscow standards. I am not sure of its pedigree but it lacked the wedding cake architecture favored by Stalin and the heroic monolithic style favored by someone in some architectural bureaucracy. It was located on the corner of Gorky Street and the Garden Ring known as the Inner Ring which allowed for some reasonably pleasant walking – and it was possible to reach the centre of the City on foot. That was important in those days since finding a taxi was an absolutely random affair – flashing a pack of Marlboro cigarettes was by far the most effective part of the wave. The Peking hotel architecture suggested construction prior to the Revolution of 1917 so that it at least had some internal and external character. The name and the presence of the best Chinese restaurant in the City may have had some special historical reasons – but they were unknown to me. The presence of a clean room, great location and a Chinese cook were enough of an attraction. These names in Moscow may have suggested points in time when the political agenda focused on certain external friendships and I suspect that was part of the reason for the existence of this hotel. The Soviet Union and India enjoyed a special relationship throughout this period and we experienced the result through another food experience. We were really exhausted from the terrible cuisine at the various official hotels – you had to pay a bribe to get a table in an empty restaurant and then pay again for bad food. On one occasion Sasha had asked if I wanted to go to the ‘deli restaurant’ – at least that is what I heard. I was thrilled at the thought of a good corned beef sandwich – on arrival realized it was the ‘Delhi restaurant’ and we had a marginal approximation of curry. Since I had lived in South Asia it did not quite meet my expectations – but I realized there was very little that existed or happened in Moscow that did not have a political origin or rationale.

Sasha, Lee and I headed for the revolution.

We had planned to return to Moscow that Tuesday from Kazakhstan to meet our daughter and a group of teachers from our first “Summer Language Institute” in Lithuania – then still an integral part of the USSR. We had just completed a visit to Northern Kazakhstan where I was the proud owner of a velvet plaque that indicated that I was “Investor number 8” in either all of Kazakhstan or the northern territory. We had arrived on the weekend to be hosted by our friend who was taking full advantage of the emerging opportunities to participate in various enterprises – including long distance transport, fuel and construction. The early Monday agenda was the tour of a furniture factory – the industry in which I was engaged back in Canada. With the reality of time zones – we were touring the factory while Moscow was waking up – to an expected August sunrise but unexpectedly to a news conference of 6 senior military and political officials who announced that they had taken over the Government on the

weekend and Gorbachev was their prisoner. Most of the factory workers had abandoned their machines and were huddled in the cafeteria with eyes glued to a little TV screen and the news conference. The message was translated to me as it was in process. My Soviet friends have survived by reading and interpreting body language and nuance. My host stood beside me and watched this nervous and possibly inebriated sextet and announced – “they will not make it”. That is – they do not have what it takes to pull off this revolution – however they did have the power of the entire military and intelligence apparatus at their disposal so could be rather dangerous. An example of the clever way reporters dealt with the challenges of the system was the question at the televised live news conference – after the coup leadership group had declared that Yeltsin was on their side – “... and how do you respond to the call by Yeltsin for a national strike?”

We quickly realized that nothing exciting or dangerous was likely to happen in this remote and largely ignored corner of the empire –so we could have safely sat out the whole event. Others took more dramatic action. The Canadian who was CEO of McDonalds Canada was also responsible for the development of McDonalds in the Soviet Union and happened to be somewhere in the Caucasus at the time. He either chartered a plane or took some other flight and made a ‘dramatic’ escape from this dangerous state of affairs by flying to Turkey. It was sort of like a revolution in Washington and you are in Arizona and escape to Mexico – but his ‘daring’ escape made the headlines in Canada!

It is not every day that you get to experience a tumultuous change in the state of the world – and I had already missed the fall of the Berlin Wall while being trapped somewhere in remote Russia on that occasion. We abandoned our factory tour, evaluated our options and decided to stick to our schedule and head for Moscow early the next morning. In those days all flights passed through Moscow anyhow – the original hub-and-spoke system in the airline industry! The local joke was that there were now 5 airports in Moscow since a German teenager had recently flown a small plane all the way from Western Europe at low levels, evaded all of the defensive systems and landed in Red Square. We arrived at Domedyevo?? Airport on the eastern extremity of Moscow – the four airports are organized like the train stations in Paris – if you fly north your airport will be on the northern side of the city. If you need to transfer airports – good luck! It was a hub and spoke system with a rather dysfunctional hub.

We took a taxi to the center of the city and aimed for the well-located Peking Hotel. By this time the people of Moscow had begun to absorb the import of the news and had gathered in all of the major squares and boulevards – the Inner Ring near the Peking Hotel was one of these destinations. We never got closer than 5 blocks when the crowds on this very wide boulevard took over and taxi travel ended. We took our luggage and wandered through this rather aimless crowd to our hotel. This was noon on Tuesday.

The revolution actually started some time on Saturday when the military detained President Gorbachev at his dacha in the Crimea. Sunday was a day of some confusion and the nation did not really know what had happened until the early Monday news conference. We had departed Lithuania on the Saturday morning to fly (through Moscow) to Kazakhstan. Lithuania was one of the 15?? fictional Republics in the Soviet Union – which to the chagrin of Russian authorities claimed to be less than fictional when the Soviet Center disintegrated. Lithuania had in fact anticipated the collapse of the empire by declaring itself independent of Moscow in (date). A group of young leaders had barricaded themselves inside the Lithuanian Parliament Buildings and surrounded themselves with sandbags to act as tank traps. The Soviet army surrounded the whole place with tanks from time to time – but it was really a political tempest in a teapot that Gorbachev was not committed to end with the required violence. We had become part of these events in November of 1990 when we responded to an invitation by this ‘revolutionary’ Government to help connect them to the West. The negotiations took place inside this ‘fortress’ and the result was an agreement to create an English language program with the goal of creating a Western-oriented University. (This actually happened – today LCC International University exists and prospers in historic Klaipeda serving students from Lithuania and the various parts of the former empire). Our daughter Tara had stimulated our involvement in Lithuania when she joined a group of German young people (all émigrés from the Soviet Union) who travelled to Lithuania in the summer of 1990 to support the emerging Christian movement. This had resulted in a 6-week English language program in the City of Panevezys?? in the summer of 1991. The program had ended on the Friday and Lee and I participated in the closing. Our younger daughter Tara was back in Lithuania for a second summer with her group of street activists. Our older daughter Shanti had participated as instructor in the English language program. Shanti and most of the other teachers had decamped for St. Petersburg and on the Monday evening had boarded the overnight express to Moscow. The prospect of this group of foreigners arriving in the middle of a revolution was an additional reason for me to head for Moscow – we managed to place them in a hotel at the extremity of Moscow for some modicum of safety – to the chagrin of some of the younger members who would much rather march with placards. They did manage to create their own adventure and Shanti possesses a photograph of her sitting on a tank with Soviet soldiers with the Kremlin in the background. It seems a soldier can always be diverted by an attractive woman.

Tara had remained in Lithuania with her German group and her future husband Peter. Since Lithuania had been the epicenter of revolt prior to this time there was greater potential for violence – especially if those in Parliament attempted some kind of action. Tara and her group headed for the Polish border and returned safely to Germany with great stories and memories – but safe. Given our situation and limited communication we would not know her whereabouts until a few days later.

We proceeded to make contact with friends and acquaintances among the foreigners, the local Christians like Sasha and various Government officials that were part of our circle of contacts. There was no local access to news and what there was would be in Russian. Possibly the world observing events on CNN was more informed than we were! However, we were not without resources. I had been involved with people in the media and television business – official Soviet television. One friend was a well-known TV personality with her own current affairs program every Wednesday evening from 1800 - 2100. I had been part of an interview on an earlier occasion and we were friends together with some of her staff. A young woman from this group was a reporter – a single mother (many Russian women had given up marriages in disgust over the behavior of their husbands) who spoke no English but a reasonable German. Her TV group was based 12 floors up on the very visible Moscow communications tower. They were documenting the revolution as it was happening not knowing if they would be able to ever broadcast the outcome. They had staff stationed at ground level for the purpose of warning if military appeared – they would then send up a quick message and all documentation would be destroyed while the troops travelled up the 12 floors! Her role was to monitor the Vnukovo?? airport at the southern edge of the City. (Our son-in-law Dan would at a much later date sell public seating to this airport). If there was any movement between the Crimea and Moscow it would be expected to happen at this airport. In the absence of modern or trustworthy communication – she would travel back and forth continually to check the airport – then to the TV tower to relay any recent news or gossip – then back to the airport. While at the Tower she had good phone access so we arranged that each time she was in the tower we would have a phone conversation and I and some colleagues would be updated on what she knew or more important what the whole TV group knew – since they had many reporters monitoring the situation from many vantage points.

That brings us to Tuesday evening and the invitation from Sasha to head for the White house. The White House is a multi-story office building that contains the Soviet Parliament?? . Boris Yeltsin was the mayor??? Of Moscow and when the news of the putsch by the military group became public he headed for the White House and announced to the world that he and the people of the Soviet Union would not accept this attempt to take over the Government. There is the famous photograph of Yeltsin standing on a tank, waving his arms and telling the world that the putsch will not succeed. Yeltsin had no troops or any particular authority so this was a bold move. There was a call for the people of Moscow to defend the counter-revolution at the White House by showing up to surround the Parliament with their bodies. A number of streets radiate from the square in front of the White House and the public began to build barricades that looked like the common images of the French revolution except that the pile of rubble was composed of more technologically modern trash like vehicles and buses or anything that could be pushed or lifted into a pile that would discourage tanks or other forms of attack. When we

arrived we had to climb over or around four separate barricades to get to the center where we estimated some 50,000 people were gathered.

It was a warm night with light rain and the whole affair was surrealistic. The ??? river is directly to the east of the White House and one theory was that any attack would likely come by helicopter from across the river. Another theory was that the first tanks would be allowed past the barricades and that the vast crowd would then block the infantry with their bodies. We watched as military veterans with all of their honors on their chest, tears streaming down their faces - dragged pieces of steel to add to the pile. They were joined by office secretaries in short skirts and high heels, bureaucrats in suits and groups of thugs. Surrealism became real when we noticed a group of Hare Krishnas chanting among the metal scrap of a barricade! The most amazing memory is the silence – no bullhorns, no roaring engines, no helicopters, no guns – only the sound of metal being dragged on concrete and the crash as a crane would drop another vehicle on top of a pile that was already a couple of stories high.

It was still early evening and there was no sign of central authority or purpose – just an air of expectancy. With multiple barricades on each street and the river to the West – we realized that should an attack occur there was really no avenue of escape. While I have been in some challenging situations I did not consider myself entirely foolhardy. I was later asked by friends how we could make the decision to put ourselves into such a position of risk. My answer was “the kids are adults, my insurance is paid – and I want to see the end of the revolution that had affected my family so much.” Anyhow – having been in a war zone before it seemed prudent to at least understand my surroundings and options. On one corner of the square is the American Embassy. The gates and wall were high and the marines were not even available to discuss the possible merit of our being allowed emergency access. They were inside their own fortress. At an adjacent corner is the Mir (Peace) Hotel – a relatively modern structure of about 20 stories with the wide side facing the White House. This is the view of events as seen by the world since CNN and other news agencies were positioned in windows at the higher reaches of this building. Given that it contained many foreigners we assumed that it would be the least obvious target of attack on the square – so access to the Mir might be a good thing. Soviet soldiers were stationed at the entrance to the hotel and only allowed entry to those who could prove they were registered residents. After a couple of futile efforts on my part – and my Russian friends were even less successful – we went to strategy B. Lee was assigned to do what women have done through history – use their guile to get past a man who was not supposed to allow them access. Lee succeeded and roamed the hotel floors to search for some friends known to be registered. Finding none – she located a Russian man standing and watching events from an upper floor and persuaded him to become her ‘sponsor’ for the evening and that included arranging access for me. After a few passes through the front door the military

took us as legitimate, and with an escape plan in place, returned to the square and our friend Sasha.

Hours passed and there was no sign of an attack, no news. The large crowd simply stayed in place. Suddenly Sasha complained of chest pains and we realized that his weak heart was not reacting well to the strain so with some assistance took him outside the barricades and arranged for him to get home. We walked along the silent Inner Ring to our hotel and decided to get some sleep. Around 4:00 A.M. we heard a low rumble – like a rolling thunder that does not end but keeps getting louder. We looked down on the Garden Ring and watched as a column of tanks rumbled toward us – away from the White House and we assumed that this had some meaning – the direction was a good omen. The world later learned that a small car with four occupants had been crushed by one of these tanks as it presumably failed to get out of the way in time. Those were the only people killed in that incredible evening.

The next day was confusion. I had planned some business meetings in other parts some inside information. The meetings were in another part of Moscow but the streets and surface life were in chaos. My contacts were also very well connected so it seemed like a good idea to be with people who would have access to information. With the surface in chaos we would use the subway and emerge close to our destination. By mid-afternoon my contact advised that some of the putsch leaders had departed Moscow via Vnukovo Airport – and this indicated that something important had happened and it was soon reported that the coup had failed. The mighty edifice of Communism that had destroyed so many generations ended with a whimper – and we were there!

We celebrated Wednesday night by taking our Lithuania teachers together with a collection of Moscow friends to dinner at the Peking Hotel Restaurant. We heard stories of the coup that had only ended hours earlier.

Our original plan for Thursday evening had been to have dinner with our friends from the TV program since we were proposing a joint business venture related to media. We now believed they would be working hard to complete their TV program but they insisted on sticking to the schedule. We had reserved a private penthouse dining room at the very exclusive “Prague” restaurant on the Arbat walking street. Our terrace faced the Kremlin and suddenly this historic fortress erupted in a massive display of fireworks. We had suggested to our friends that they should cancel the dinner since we assumed they would need to be busy with their TV program. They amazed us by pointing out that they had been documenting everything from the start of the putsch – as it happened – and had the entire program in the can by Wednesday afternoon. The show was on the air that same night with a full documentation of a coup that had ended less than 6 hours earlier – and they were celebrating with us.

Leona and I walked home to our hotel around midnight. We walked the length of the Arbat, past the National Hotel favoured by Lenin, walked in the shadow of the Kremlin walls and skirted Red Square. We then headed in the direction of our hotel. We were to learn later that the prominent statue of >???? – the founder of the KGB had been pulled down by an angry mob from its location in ???Square in front of the infamous KGB prison literally at the time that we passed by a block away.

Our memory of that evening is that in spite of the fireworks and the opportunity to attack the symbols of oppression – there was no joy in the expressions of the multitudes on the street. Somehow they sensed that while Communism in its official form had ended – the future was unknown and they had reason for fear. Twenty years later many in Russia are still waiting for the promised future. For us it was a satisfactory end to a painful family history.