

BLAME IT ON THE BEARS

Lucas Aykroyd

“Look at the bear playing hockey!” I exclaimed, pointing to the colourful banner outside the Leningrad Ice Circus. For a 10-year-old Canadian boy, this cartoon, depicting a relative of the 1980 Moscow Olympic mascot Misha with a hockey stick and skates, really had it all.

“That’s funny!” my dad said. My mom and my six-year-old sister Clarissa chuckled too. Our tour group was lining up with Russians in dark coats to enter the round, 3,000-capacity circus. And in the pre-Internet era, we didn’t realize what lay ahead.

Where do you take your pre-teen kids on their summer vacation in 1985? The Soviet Union, obviously.

Our family, who lived in Victoria, British Columbia, had a geographical advantage. Every summer, we flew—usually from Seattle to Helsinki—to visit my maternal grandmother for three or four weeks in Turku, Finland’s oldest city. Often, we checked out a nearby country as well.

In 1984, we visited the original Legoland in Billund, Denmark, sporting garbage-bag raincoats on a drizzly day as we admired a Lego diorama of ancient Egypt. The following year, my dad took things up a notch by booking a five-day round-trip tour of Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). For the four of us, it cost about \$600 CAD for the bus trip, hotel, food, guides, and admissions to attractions. I was thrilled, and not because of the price tag.

At age six, my first big international hockey memory was watching the USSR slaughter a Wayne Gretzky-led Team Canada 8-1 in the 1981 Canada Cup final. When I was seven, I devoured my parents’ paperback edition of *Animal Farm*, George Orwell’s

dark parable of Stalinist repression. And after the Soviet military shot down Korean Air Lines Flight 007 in 1983, I was horrified to read the news in the *Victoria Times-Colonist*, given all the long Finnair flights we took.

For almost any kid living in the Western world in the 1980's, the Soviet Union loomed large in the imagination—just larger than average in mine. The Cold War was still in full force, with talk of nuclear missiles on the news most nights, and Mikhail Gorbachev was “the new guy.” It felt like anything could happen.

It was about 380 kilometres from Helsinki to Leningrad. The bus ride to the Russian border felt significantly longer due to a group of young Finnish guys who weren't looking for a cultural experience. Even though cheap Communist vodka was just a few hours away, they'd already been drinking. We had to pull over because one of them had overdone it.

Getting into the Soviet Union was not easy. (Never mind the arcane pre-trip visa applications.) The KGB border guards searched everyone's bags. A long line of German tour buses—with apparently two gigantic suitcases per passenger—made the process even more tedious.

In terms of reading material, you didn't want to get caught with *Animal Farm*, the Bible, or anything else that could be deemed anti-Soviet propaganda. An officer with green shoulder boards carefully inspected *Martin Eden*, the 1909 Jack London novel my dad had brought along. He handed it back with a nod after observing that this book, describing a young proletarian writer's struggles, was actually on the officially approved list.

My mom had told us, “Russians are fond of children.” The message had definitely sunk in. I repeated that sentiment several times to Clarissa before we arrived. She was too short for the immigration officer to see while checking our passports, so my dad held up her up, and the officer cracked a smile.

Less than an hour away, we stopped for a bathroom break in Vyborg, a former Finnish town on the Baltic Sea that the Red Army

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captured in 1944. A huge blood-red portrait of Lenin overlooked the main square. I gaped at the Bolshevik leader before heading into a pitch-black room with a trough. The neat, white-tiled serenity of Finland felt far away.

Arriving in Leningrad that evening, we checked into the Hotel Evropeiskaya. Just off central Nevsky Prospekt, the 1875-built hotel has welcomed illustrious guests from Pyotr Tchaikovsky to H.G. Wells. Rebranded today as the Belmond Grand Hotel Europe, it wasn't quite as swanky in 1985.

When you're a kid, you always remember the bathroom bloopers. So, just as I was delighted when our toilet at Vancouver's Hotel Georgia let out a loud burping noise in 1983, here I was startled when I tried to turn on the water in the bathroom sink.

"Mom! The tap came off in my hand." Welcome to Russia.

Downstairs at the Beriozka, the Soviet souvenir store was reserved for tourists with Western hard currency. We bought a Matryoshka nesting doll and an English-language version of *The Adventures of Captain Wrungel*, a 1937 children's classic by Andrei Nekrasov. I realized that communism had certain advantages when the clerk gave my dad his change in the form of Danish chewing gum. Yum!

The Soviets liked to keep things red and slightly overheated indoors. This philosophy extended from our hotel room to the breakfast buffet room, which featured red velvet walls. The breakfast menu was familiar. After our frequent trips to Scandinavia, Clarissa and I weren't fazed by the salty fish, yogurt, and cucumbers adorning the buffet table.

However, the big pitchers of kvass were different. Kvass, a refreshing, lightly fermented drink made with rye bread, was ubiquitous in the USSR. To my 10-year-old palate, it wasn't that different from apple juice. We guzzled it with glee. The hungover Finnish guys always stumbled in to refuel just before the buffet shut down.

Clarissa and I weren't allowed to drink kvass from the vending machines on Nevsky Prospekt. The machines had stacks of dirty

cups that anyone could use. We noticed Russian mothers pulling clean cups out of their bags for their kids.

With the Soviet economy sputtering, there were long line-ups outside the stores. One day, I was surprised to see everyone coming out of a Nevsky Prospekt grocery store with string bags full of apricots. I hadn't had my growth spurt yet, but even though I was in Peter the Great's "Venice of the North," a 1703-built port city of palaces and canals, food and drink were always on my mind.

So when our Intourist guide took us around the State Hermitage Museum, the world's second-largest museum after the Louvre at nearly 67,000 square feet, I didn't moan about all the walking, since I was a proud member of the South Park Elementary School cross-country team. I was captivated by the ornate green pillars and fireplace in the 1839-designed Malachite Room, one of the showpieces in the Winter Palace, which was home to the tsars until the 1917 Russian Revolution. And even though I would have preferred to see a famous Leonardo da Vinci painting that wasn't a *Madonna and Child*, it was still Leonardo and therefore cool. But I did get hungry.

Alas, the cafeteria lunch line-up was not cool. In a bizarre display of bureaucracy, the Hermitage filled the cafeteria to capacity and then shut the doors. Nobody else was allowed in until the entire preceding group had finished eating and departed. I realized that Communism had certain disadvantages.

Were we bugged and followed in Leningrad? Possibly. Oleg Kalugin, a former KGB major general who defected to the West, revealed in a 1994 book that the Hotel Evropeiskaya had hidden microphones in certain rooms and that almost all Intourist guides were KGB informers. Still, our family had no nuclear secrets to spill.

We gabbed about the tasty ice cream and the Cyrillic characters on the Pepsi-Cola bottles—Pepsi had outmanoeuvred Coke for exclusive distribution rights in the Soviet Union. We laughed about getting sprayed by the fountains at Peter the Great's Summer Palace, which we visited by hydrofoil on the Neva River. That was

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sophisticated transportation. I can still see the clunky Soviet cars—surprisingly few for a city of five million—trundling along Nevsky Prospekt on the June “white nights.”

Still, no other sight could top the Leningrad Ice Circus’s hockey-playing bears.

Clowns skated around. Trapeze artists swung and flipped over the rink. “Kalinka”-style music got the audience clapping along. It was fantastic, but apart from the ice factor, it wasn’t overwhelmingly different from the Shriners Circus that visited Victoria’s Memorial Arena each year. That is, until the bears came skating out with hockey sticks.

I gasped. “Are those real bears?”

At first, we thought they were actors in furry suits, even though they moved rather awkwardly for humans. Hockey nets were set up and the referee dropped the puck. One bear tripped the referee, got a penalty, and skated off to the penalty box. When another bear crouched down and tried to gnaw at the puck, it became undeniable.

“I think they are real!” my dad exclaimed.

Several Russians sitting in front of us, presumably having heard variations on this conversation before, turned around, nodding and gesturing. Yep. Real bears.

The evidence still exists on YouTube. Today, I can’t defend what must have gone into training the bears to play hockey. In 1985, I’m not sure it even crossed my mind. At the circus in Victoria, I’d joined other kids to ride an elephant, swaying high above the arena floor. Our city council wouldn’t vote to ban circus acts with animals until 1991.

Looking back, those Leningrad bears encapsulate what made the Soviet Union a magical and sinister place for me. And our family never quite got it out of our system.

Clarissa has taken Russian lessons. She acquired an insatiable thirst for spy novels, attending John Le Carré’s book launches in London, where she now works in publishing. Meanwhile, as a hockey journalist, I’ve just kept on going back to post-Soviet Russia, with a generous serving of *déjà vu*.

In 2000, I returned to St. Petersburg as the editor of the International Ice Hockey Federation's first-ever official World Championship web site. After the host nation's opening 8-1 win over France, I spotted newly installed Russian leader Vladimir Putin across the room at a reception, flanked by his gigantic bodyguards. The metaphorical bears proved toothless, as the Russian team collapsed and finished in eleventh place.

In 2014, I gaped at the massive menace of Bely Mishka, the polar bear mascot of the Winter Olympics, during the opening ceremonies in Sochi. Between hockey games, I visited Stalin's summer home.

In 2018, I turned down invitations to cover the Commonwealth Games in Australia and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductions in Cleveland. I was unavailable because I'd already committed to a junior hockey tournament in Magnitogorsk and Chelyabinsk. Those industrial cities in the Ural Mountains supplied steel, ammunition, and tanks during World War II.

You get the picture. I'm now older than my dad was when our family went to Leningrad. It's weird when I think about it.

How did I go from lining up for goalie Vladislav Tretiak's autograph in Victoria to leading a panel discussion that included the now-president of the Russian Ice Hockey Federation at an international summit in Copenhagen? In my leisure time, what compels me to re-read Archie Brown's *The Rise & Fall of Communism*? Why do I own a teddy bear-shaped honey jar from the Republic of Bashkortostan?

Blame it on the bears.

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in Sochi and four IIHF World Hockey Championships in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Note: Lucas cannot guarantee that drinking fermented horse milk in Ufa or discovering how the KGB bugged the Hotel Viru in Tallinn will be fun for the whole family.