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March 3rd 1991

Notes and Impressions after initial reconnaissance trip to Tashkent
and Uzbekistan

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Dear Peter,

You will forgive me for writing you another "preliminary" epistle wherein I touch on fifteen different themes in a cursory manner and promise greater depth later.

For that is what the following letter will be: an impressionistic rendering of my two and a half week reconnaissance trip to Tashkent and Uzbekistan, during which time I was fairly overwhelmed with often contradictory information.

It was a fine trip and there is much to report, but before getting into the color and culture of the area, let me set out a few basic points:

First and foremost, the basic mission has been accomplished--IE, I have succeeded in securing long-term residency.

In fact, this essential element of the prelim-trip was effected with surprising ease: I may have been the most popular guy in Tashkent, with institutions and individuals vying for the ability to be associated with me/ICWA by proffering me residency permits right and left. I still haven't completely sorted out the cause for this receptivity, but I think the reason is predicated on the general mess and confusion prevailing throughout the Soviet Union: everyone is looking for link to the outside world, and yours truly offered just such a lifeline. ~~Now~~ It should be noted right away that they--individuals and institutions--were also looking for immediate gain, meaning access to hard currency.

I had three main negotiating partners, and could have had more.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

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The first were my hosts--a small, private do-everything firm I will call "The Three Sergiis". They seem to have a finger in every economic soup-bowl in the country, from purveying computer soft-ware to organizing personalized "business" tours to Uzbekistan. My visa, I discovered, stated that the purpose of my travel to the USSR was for "negotiations", that is business, and with them. Initially, I assumed that this was simply a means for the Three Sergiis to make an end-run around the Intourist monopoly on travel and pick up the considerable difference between what I paid in hard currency to their American partners and what they paid in ruble-rated hotels and airfares for me: something along the order of 700 percent.

But if profit was a big part of their interest in my travels, they were also keen on simply getting a leg out in the world, and bringing a leg of the world (mine) to them. This means using me as a consultant in their various business ventures, ranging from critiquing the services available in their new, 40 room "businessman's hotel" (a former guest house of some state enterprise) to helping organize an up-coming "international business management conference" in Tashkent. There were other projects, too: involvement in a prospective travel-related book on Central Asia, import/export assistance, etc. I imagine that somewhere down the line a request will come in to sponsor a trip to the USA or elsewhere, too.

In the end, the Three Sergiis issued me another invitation to conduct six months worth of "consultations" as a back-up to my primary sponsor (more on which later) with the understanding that even if unofficial, they will aid and assist me during my sojourn. I think it goes without saying that the company deserves greater treatment in a future newsletter, provisionally entitled:

~~The Problems Involved In Establishing And Running A Private Business In The USSR (or: how to graduate from fly-by-night grey marketeering to legitimate business).~~

A last and interesting note on the firm: all of the Sergiis are non-Uzbeks, but all were born and raised in Tashkent and intend on staying there. In anticipation of future changes in the structure of Soviet society, though, they have instituted an intensive Uzbek language course in their office every Tuesday and Thursday that must be attended by all their 30 employees. The writing is on the wall: Uzbekistan will increasingly be Uzbek, and not Russian, and they want a piece of the future action as fully integrated members of society, and do not wish to be seen as interlopers.

And the Three Sergiis were not alone in trying to link up with me.

Their rivals in the touristic/business travel sphere are the recently founded Uzbekistan National Tourism Agency, Sayakh, who also want a piece of the hard-currency action that comes along with shuffling foreigners around the country (or, in my instance, granting long-term residency permit). The director, an Uzbek gentlemen more comfortable speaking Russians than Uzbek, was particularly interested in my producing a new, travel-related book on Central Asia as well as in gouging me for as much cash as possible.

The word is out: ~~Workers of the World! Get hard currency!~~ And it appears that everyone in Tashkent--from bureaucrats to proto-businessmen--were willing to bend rules to accomplish that noble end.

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Again, Sayakh seems to warrant greater investigation as yet another example of local/national institutions trying to break free of Moscow's embrace. The last time I was at the Sayakh offices, the director and his staff were busy negotiating a new deal with a Belgian travel agency; they maintain that they have growing connections with others on the "outside" as well.

In the event, though, I settled for official association with the University of Tashkent, partially due to its legitimacy and prestige but mainly due to the insistence of the head of the department of history, one Professor Goga Khidiatov, that I become his Man Friday.

Every time we met, Goga had a new joint project to work on, ranging from creating the aforementioned popular guide to Turan/Turkistan/Central Asia to writing a new Uzbek/English dictionary ("Goga, I have to learn Uzbek first."/"No matter, I will help you") to filming Goga's planned exploration of the Silk Road in western China this coming September.

Part of the program also includes bending-ear to Goga as the new history of the region is written; he specifically wants me to work on the subject of Enver Pasha, the Ottoman Turkish leader who died at the head of the Qurbashies/Basmachies while fighting the Soviets in 1919. The idea is attractive indeed, in that Enver has largely been erased in Turkish historiography due to the Atatürk tradition while at the same time he has been demonized by Soviet historians as being the leader of the guerrilla movement designed to thwart communist aims in Central Asia by uniting the Turkic states of the region. A double loser, he remains a potent symbol of pan-Turkism.

~~The Ghost Of Enver Pasha~~---another theme for a future newsletter.

In addition to the plethora of Goga-projects, my formal position in the university will be as a visiting professor lecturing on Turkey or the Middle East or, alternatively, American subjects. The first seems the most attractive for all concerned: students and faculty will be treated to a series of talks focusing on the economic and political transformation of their cousin country to the West with which I am so attached and familiar, while I will have established a framework to develop a serious book on Turkey which is long overdue.

On a more mundane level, I should also note that I had to fight off repeated requests to include a "teach English" clause in the contract with the university, despite the offer to double my salary, and then triple it. The final sum agreed upon, to be drawn from a monthly dollar charge billed to ICWA, will be 280 Rubles, or around \$15 (fifteen) per month at the black market exchange rate, along with a sight-unseen apartment, a tutor for Uzbek (and Russian) as well as three university-funded research trips within Uzbekistan a year. The university also promises to be helpful in gaining long term access to the other "---stans" of the area.

So: the residency linkage has been made, a prestigious position obtained and commitments to time-consuming, non-productive projects minimalized. If the university comes through with half off its promises, I will be happy.

I think we can categorically declare that the show is on the road.

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The Politics of Language

And the trip also served as a curtain-raiser about what the rest of the tour will be about.

Again, I am obliged to underline the fact that I was subjected to a plethora of impressions, so that perhaps much of what is to follow will be subject to revision as I go along.

First and foremost is the subject of language, and here a great contradiction pertains: while I was able to make great progress in adjusting from Turkish to Uzbek--at the end of two weeks I was able to get along quite nicely, even if patience was required of my interlocutors--I was also forced to accept that I will have to learn functional Russian: the vast majority of people in Tashkent--Uzbeks included--only use Uzbek as a kitchen language.

This raises a number of uncomfortable questions, the most essential of which is: what is Uzbek and who are the Uzbeks?

On a totally subjective level, I think I can say that the concept of a separate and distinct Uzbek language is a colonial creation of Soviet commissars more interested in dividing and ruling the native population of Central Asia than in promoting a genuine ethnic and lingual identity to emerge from the Turki-speakers of the region.

A cursory review of cultural history is perhaps in order:

Up until the early 1920s there was no Uzbekistan. There never had been. The word itself comes from a rather amorphous group of clans or tribes largely indistinguishable from the Kazaks and other Chagatay Turki-speaking groups for much of their history. "Turkistanian" is the label favored by Columbia University Professor (and preeminent Central Asia expert) Edward Allworth, and I think it is apt. I also hope he will forgive me for any heavy-handed extrapolations from his work I indulge in.

Nor was there anything known as the "Uzbek" language until the 1920s. Rather, there were a number of more or less distinct dialects of Turki; intellectual discourse and literary and diplomatic activity was mainly conducted in Chagatay (call it the court language of Tamerland and his successors) or Ottoman Turkish or Farsi (Persian).

But with the arrival of the Soviets following the October Revolution of 1917, and especially after Stalin took control of the Communist Party in the 1920s, the hairline fractures between the various sub-Turki dialects were widened into fissures, and then cemented into chasms. In essence, it was a program of taking kitchen languages and elevating them to a "national" status, thus sealing in "ethnic" differences where none had previously existed.

And the commissars of yore have found contemporary allies among the orientalist/dialectology crowd, the sort of guys who can tell you that the differences in emphasis in the ablative case in Kazak and Uzbek and Kirghiz render those tongues mutually unintelligible, but who cannot order a plov at a street stand.

But there is a difference between theory and practice, and in this case it is great indeed: with no great theoretical base to work from and thus with nothing much to prove, I quickly discovered not only the virtual identity between Uzbek and Turkish, but also the other Turkic languages (like Tatar) in the neighborhood as well. Barely two months

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into the study of the problem, I am just about ready to reject the idea that there is an Uzbek language at all.

The theorists will wince and professors with a vested interest in the promotion of Uzbek literature will howl, and others will say that I was adjusting my Turkish toward "Uzbek" while my interlocutors were trying to adjust their "Uzbek" toward Turkish, but that all just proves the point: there is, in essence, just one large language stretching from the Xinkiang in China to the shores of the Mediterranean, and the divisions that exist have been imposed from the outside for a specific political reason.

This is known as divide and rule, and it has ^{been} masterfully effected in Central Asia.

A similar effort by outland administrators aided, often unknowing by scholarly pursuit, also attempted to subdivide Arabic into dialects so discrete that they would have become different languages if accepted by the Arabs themselves. But the Arabs resisted this lingual Balkanization. And although the spoken street language of, say, Damascus and Algiers is as different as Cockney and West Texan, the written and intellectual language of discourse is standard and remains the single greatest unifying factor in the otherwise fractured Arab world--and one of the reasons that pan-Arabism continues to be a force to be reckoned with in the world today.

The Central Asians, the scholars and theorists assure us, failed at preserving that essential unity by force of circumstance and history, and are now resigned to owing fidelity to only one dialect and to one, small homeland--Uzbekistan, Kazakistan, Turkmenistan (or even small 'autonomous' regions carved into the larger Republics, like the Karakalpak ASSR in the Uzbekistan SSR.)

Or are they?

Certainly, 70 years of communal identity by command must have had some effect on the self-defining of the population. But even after my superficial insights into the problem, I think it fair to question the very notion that there is a separate "Uzbek" nation, and that the sarcastic tone of the 1924 political cartoon quoted by Allworth in his The Modern Uzbeks still pertains:

"Before the partition (of Central Asia) in nationality republics, we got so completely befuddled that we couldn't figure out which of the nationalities we ourselves might belong to."

Much of this argument must seem hopelessly obscure, because few are familiar with the Arabs circa 1918, much less the politics of deepest darkest Turkistan. Thus, allow me to change gears and move to a closer, theoretical model--Germany.

Imagine a foreign power, the United States, say, in the aftermath of World War One, insisting that every dialect in the land be declared a language in its own right and that it be written in accordance with its own idiosyncrasies.

And more: the imposing power, in its wisdom, not only chose a local dialect to promote to "language" status but cynically selected the most obscure and non-representative regional sub-dialect as the officially sanctioned "national" tongue. Not just "Bavarian", but

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"Obergamergauese"; not just Plattdeutsch, but "Hamburgian".

Making the picture even more complex is the fact that Uzbek/Turki has gone through five script reforms during the past 70 years, three major and two minor.

Traditionally, Chagatay/Turki was written in an Arabic-based script, close to or identical with Ottoman Turkish, with minor changes effected to certain letters to reflect small dialectical differences. Then in the 1920s a Latin-based script was introduced in parallel with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's language reforms in the newly founded Republic of Turkey. In both instances, the reforms were intended to drive a wedge between the present and the past, disassociating the "modern" language from the pious orthography of Quranic Arabic.

But as soon as it became clear that Ataturk's Turkey was not going to become another Soviet (in the early days, this was not evident) and Moscow was given pause in its language politics for Central Asia. So, even while the Anatolian Turks were going their own way in weeding out Farsi and Arabic accretions to their Turkish (and replacing them with "pure" Turkish words remarkably similar to French) the Soviet commissars changed Uzbek from the new Latin script over to a Cyrillic-based alphabet, icing the lingual cake by adding a few special characters and subtracting a few others to reflect Tashkent Turki--rather like removing the symbol of "th" from New York English and replacing it with a simple "d" so that "that" would be written and pronounced as "dat". To be scientifically specific, what was removed were the letters that create the "vowel harmony" unique to the Turkic languages of the world--with the exception of the dialect of Tashkent.

As a last note in this confusing picture, I should add that there is even now a movement afoot to return Uzbek/Turki to the Arabic-based script which pertained prior to 1920, in effect re-linking "Uzbek" with Uigher--itself a nearly identical "language" spoken in western China, which is still written in Arabic script. The Uighers, I should note, didn't know they were Uighers until informed of the fact in the 1920s...

While some might complain that changing Uzbek back to Arabic will deprive young Uzbeks access to the archives of their forefathers during the glory days of Soviet socialism, cynics note that the bulk of the accumulated literature written in Cyrillic Uzbek was not particularly profound anyway, having had to go through far too many censors to have much more than a lasting curiosity value. Also, Moscow's effective promotion of Russian as the primary medium of education and communication (Uzbek newspapers and television news tend to feature reports on weighty subjects like how many tons of cotton were harvested from such and such a collective farm, while the national news in Russian informs one of developments in the Kremlin and the world) has had the result that many Uzbeks have not really paid a lot of attention to the official version of what their language is supposed to be, and now, with the shackles of state socialism falling away, many are returning not just from Russian to "Uzbek" but to proto-Uzbek--IE, the superregional Turki of the past.

There are profound political consequences in this shift: for if "Uzbek" is being recognized as being a somehow phony and limiting language, "Uzbekistan" is also being recognized as a somehow phony and

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limiting country. And many of my Turki-speaking interlocutors professed an interest in riding themselves of the specific designation of being an ethnic "Uzbek" and graduating (or returning) to the larger communal world of belonging to "Turkistan" or "Turan".

Clearly, this is a subject that deserves a great deal of attention and investigation, for its smacks of the similar and failed yearning of the Arabs to unite into a single or federated nation after their division by the European colonial powers into discrete states which, like the six Soviet Republics of Central Asia, never existed in history. And if one accepts the notion that this artificial division is at least partially responsible for the virulent sort of pan-Arab nationalism represented by individuals like Saddam Hussein, then one can become worried indeed over the prospect of a similar rise in xenophobia in Central Asia.

Goga Khidiatov, for one, professed his concern on exactly this point. While he personally believes in the creation of a federated state of "Turan" or "Turkistan" (although he also suggested that Kazakhstan should be excluded from any future union as it had long passed the point of assimilation into "Russia") he told me that he would be voting "yes" or pro-union in Gorbachev's March 17th referendum about the future status of the USSR. Goga's reasoning was pretty straightforward: full independence along the Baltic model means the creation of an army, and that throughout the Muslim world, the presence of independent, national armies have inevitably led to military coups and junta rule as well as a huge expenditure on defense. Best to stay semi-subjects of Moscow than to risk a Central Asian Saddam, he seemed to imply.

Others were less sanguine about remaining part of the "big country" (IE, the USSR). A Kazan Tatar taxi driver--again, speaking to me in a Turki I could understand, and he mine, despite the insistence of the experts that it should not and cannot be so--insisted that I get in contact with him upon my return to meet with the leadership of Birlik, the pan-Turkistanian movement with bases in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, the Crimea and elsewhere in greater Turan. I have to confess to a small white lie in this and other conversations, as I maintained that my father was Turkish and my mother American simply to make my ability to speak Turki a little more explicable.

Curiously, perhaps, the driver also insisted that the Turkistanians were avid supporters of the United States and the coalition against Saddam Hussein and Iraq on the logic that it was Reagan who brought the Soviet Union to its economic knees. The logic is that the Soviet leadership is largely Russian and the Russians are not only the traditional oppressors of the Turkistanians, but also the people who built up Saddam's arsenal. Ergo, the support for the United States...

Even the non-Muslims of the area echoed this sentiment, lopping off part of the argument and simply declaring that it was the communists who befriended Saddam, ergo, they support the United States. Although this is outside my ken for the time being, I have to note that Gorbachev's stock--and that of his party--would seem to be at an all time low. But I am straying from the point.

The flip-side of this initial excursion into the politics of language culture in Uzbekistan (and Central Asia) is the fact that,

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like it or not and all wishful thinking aside, Russian and Russian culture dominate.

At first, this was very distressing and I was tearing out my hair in rage and frustration as taxi drivers, waiters and bazaar merchants blithely babbled on in Russian, oblivious to the fact that I couldn't understand a word.

And it wasn't just that folks thought that I was a Russian: not only was Russian the medium of conversation between the plethora of ethnic groups in Tashkent (Russians, Jews, Ukrainians, Koreans, Estonians, etc) but it was also the primary medium of exchange between many Uzbeks themselves. Even Goga and his wife speak Russian at home.

One night, I was invited by Rustem Irmatov, the head of the aforementioned Uzbekistan national travel bureau, to a birthday party for his wife. I was the only none Uzbek at the table littered with bottles of vodka and plates of salmon eggs and diverse cold cuts. The guests rose by turns to toast the director's wife--all in Russian. And when I asked that someone translate some of the names of the food into Uzbek for me, no-one knew what the words were.

There were several other similar incidents, and I was about to despair: why bother to learn a pidgin' language only used by taxi drivers or in the bazaar?

Here, too, is a subject worthy of future study--"fringe folks", or those peoples who have imperfectly maintained a sense of atavistic self after being overrun by a different, dominant culture, but who have not totally been assimilated by it.

I began casting around for other models to compare, and of course they are legion: The Turks and the Kurds; Indians and Mexicans; Africans and Arabs, etc.

The problem in terms of research is how to gain access to the fringe group, especially when most intellectual enquiry has been conducted in the secondary language. I even came up with a paradigm: imagine that you are a German, and speak Japanese and Portuguese, but no English. But by dint of your fluency in Portuguese, you have received a grant to a study the Hispanic communities of the United States. Which language do you study? English, or Spanish?

The answer, of course, is both, and that is the approach that I have now adopted.

It is a big decision, because it means that I am now about to embark on a wholly unexpected avenue--Slavic studies. But without it, the idea of living and working in Uzbekistan/Central Asia makes no sense. The strategy at this point, then, is to take a bath in "Uzbek" (or Turki) for the first three months of residency, totally shutting out Russian until I turn the corner on Uzbek comprehension, and then bite into Russian, hard.

The Am I A Buddhist? Syndrome

Well, analysis and excitement aside, I would be less than totally candid if I did not admit to succumbing to a deep, initial depression at the prospect of living in Tashkent, learning Russian and having to do battle with the legions of nasty cabbies, pimps and the lower-level mafia-types who hung around my abode, the Hotel Uzbekistan. In fact,

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prior to the realization and acceptance that I would be biting into Russian, I was ready to throw in the towel.

I describe this state of mind as the "Am I a Buddhist?" syndrome, an attitude that describes the visceral response to life on the fringes of the world when one has no belief in reincarnation and thus must ask the compelling question of why, if this is indeed our own and only, dear and precious life, should one subject oneself to the gratuitous discomfort, disease and depression of life in a rat-hole.

In retrospect, this feeling of cosmic cursedness had a lot to do with the weather.

I had flown on a egalitarian flight from Moscow aboard a Tupalov (or Andropov?) cattle-car copy of a 747 that carried around 350 other nasty passengers who had also been obliged to carry their own bags aboard and who had also been obliged to stare at the hunk of black bread and cold, grey, evil-looking chicken that passed for an in-flight meal. I couldn't eat mine.

The sky was bleak and battleship grey upon my arrival, and the Tashkent streets were slippery and dirty from a mix of snow, soot, mud and crud as the city was just recovering from one of the occasional winter storms that paralyze the place and force all residents into big furry hats and grey-coats, making them look like mean and impersonal robots.

And retreating to my \$70 a night room on the eighth floor of the Hotel Uzbekistan was no solace, either: to fast forward for a comparison, when I arrived in Copenhagen on my way out and checked into a regular airport hotel, I felt that I had entered heaven: clean sheets, clean carpets and clear, hot water! My thrill at these basics of a decent hostel only underline their absence at the good Hotel Uzbekistan where, when I turned on the tap, I would be greeted by a stream of grey-green miasmic goo spewing forth from the spigot, if it worked at all.

The rest of the room was more of the same: two coffin-like single beds, with the head and foot boards so high and so close that I had to sleep with my ankles draped over the edge; caked dust and crud on the floors, dubious sheets and a balcony overlooking the urban sprawl of a city of four million souls, none of whom seemed happy.

It was a thoroughly depressing introduction to Tashkent, those first three days, and I had to ask myself some pretty basic questions, such as:

"Tommy, what are you doing here?"

It was an honest question that begged a response before I could procede, and it is probably well that my return ticket was in two weeks and included a clause concerning steep fines if I changed it, because I was tempted to do just that.

The malaise started, perhaps, with my inability to make contacts outside the hotel due to the erratic nature of the telephone system.

For starters, there was no switchboard in the hotel; every room had its individual (and free) telephone.

Now, this may seem like a dandy and egalitarian way of doing things, but for the non-Russian (or broken Uzbek) speaking foreigner, this meant to get through to anyone, I had to drag one of the floor ladies or key girls into the room (leading to a few misunderstandings)

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and then manage to explain whom I wanted to talk to and about what subject and then decipher the response. Occasionally, I could enlist the services of my hall-mate, Valerie, an east (small E) German steward formerly with the now-defunct Interflug but seconded to the west (small W) German charter company Condor to act as a Russian-speaking station manager in Tashkent for the course of the Gulf War, but when he was out, things got pretty problematic and frustrating.

Receiving calls was just as bad, if not worse, due to the fact that there was no receptionist in the entire hotel, and that one (me, in this instance) was obliged to wait in one's room for incoming calls from the outside world (or city), staring at the crusty and peeling walls for hours on end.

It goes without saying that the concept of "room service" was non-existent; for refreshments (and sustenance) one had to ascend to one of the several "buffets" (sort of espresso coffee shops with bad cold-cut sandwiches also available on the upper floors) or descend to the mammoth hotel restaurant on the ground floor or the "Oriental Cafe" in the basement. Quality of food and service aside, timing was important here, as all the lower level establishments had ear-splitting disco/rock bands who rendered conversation (and indeed, thought) impossible when they cranked up the volume, and one had to work things so as to be in and out of the restaurant before the first chord was played.

And my first few forays outside my hotel prison, too, were singularly unproductive and depressing.

First, the sidewalk outside the hotel was dangerous: some sort of grey, monumental granite, it absorbed just enough moisture to form a thin, nearly invisible layer of ice on top, making each outing a potential rendezvous with a chiropractor or bone specialist. The sidewalks and streets were the same, making the prospect of just wandering around less than inviting.

But even after sucking up my courage to brave the skating-rink streets and forcing myself out to mingle with the masses, I soon discovered a new level of frustration: no-one wanted to speak Uzbek (or my Turkish version of that language), insisting always on Russian, Russian, Russian.

It was also a problem finding the masses in place to mingle with: there were no flashy signs advertising Joe's Eats or Blue Moon Disco; there were no advertisements at all. And even if you knew of some place to go to, there was no guarantee that you could get in. One night, in the company of a Yugoslav telephone technician and three lovely Danish stewardesses from Sterling Air (like Condor, their charter airline was using Tashkent as a refueling and crew-change stop for the fun-in-the-sun flights from northern Europe to the resorts of the Indian Ocean and South East Asia), I wandered forth to find an alternative to the Hotel Uzbekistan kitchen. We had heard of a massive structure we dubbed the "Three in One" restaurant complex, and actually succeeded in finding it, but none of the three, identically huge and impersonal bistros, would take us in: it was after 8:00, and they only served between 5:00 and 8:00. Next we managed to locate one of the few quasi-private eateries in town, a collective restaurant situated in the antechamber of an historic sauna-spa. The prospects

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here were better, but we still could not be seated because the place was booked solid. In despair, we were obliged to return to the Hotel Uzbekistan where the Yugoslav worked a deal with the kitchen manager to have a batch of potatoes and a few slabs of beef sent up to the room (actually, he had to wait around the kitchen and deliver our repast himself). We were joined by some of the other foreigners hanging around Tashkent town, and it was then that the I'm not a Buddhist syndrome hit me with full force.

"So," asked one of the stewardesses, "What are you doing here?"

I tried to explain that I was setting up a two year residency.

"You're crazy," she said, and meant it.

So did Schultz, the German transport man moving refrigerators, VCRs and other electronic junk to Afghanistan; so did Hans, the Swiss cotton merchant, looking for a big break if and when Uzbekistan starts to export raw cotton directly; so did Condor's Valerie; so did they all.

And suddenly, reviewing the first few days, I was ready to agree with them.

Why, in God's good name, if this is indeed our one and only, dear and precious life, spend even a fraction of it in a rat hole? Only, analogous to the man who beats himself on the head with a hammer because it feels so good when he stops, to experience relief and joy when the toilet flushes and the tap-water does not give one pause?

I exaggerate only slightly when I say I was ready to throw in the towel.

But then on day three (or was it four?) the sun came out and the street sludge washed away and bits of green grass began to appear and the grey, lifeless mulberry trees began to bud and the telephones worked and short appointments by day turned into long dinners by night and friendships were born and the frustration of having to deal in Russian turned into a challenge to learn the language and everything started to take on a different hue.

Tashkent Town

I will not exaggerate and declare that Tashkent is beautiful.

It is not.

Tashkent is a typical Soviet/East Block city of mass housing projects with elevators that only sometimes work and far too many monuments of Lenin and Marx.

But it is also a city of trees and parks planted by the Czarist Russians, shading solid colonial-style buildings that survived the 1966 earthquake. And with the better weather, I was able to get out and about, allowing myself to get lost in the labyrinth of parks that made up the core colonial city: for that is what Tashkent is.

Set up along a spoked grid of avenues emanating out from Revolution Park (previously known as Lenin Square and before that von Kaufmann Square after the Russian general who conquered Central Asia), the city is an organized maze, and often I would find myself re-approaching the hotel from the back when I was certain that I had proceeded in a straight line outward from the front.

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Most of "modern" downtown Tashkent post-dates the great earthquake of 1966, and in true Soviet style, generic types of work have been lumped together in single, massive structures: the KGB building flanking the aforementioned "Three in One" restaurant and beer garden building, located not far from the newspaper building in which seven (or was it eight or ten?) newspapers are published.

There was nothing of architectural interest here, but in between the seams of Stalin's city were other structures hinting at the discrete charm of colonialism, even Soviet style: the Opera building, built by Japanese POWs, the cupolas decorated in accordance with the architect's vision of central Asian themes, facing the evocative (if somewhat musty) Tashkent Hotel, a structure somehow reminiscent of the Pera Palace in Istanbul prior to that famed hostel's restoration in recent years; the former residence of the regent, tucked beneath a canopy of mulberry trees and only just obscured by the Lenin Museum. Down May 1st Avenue, crossing one of the major canals wending through the city, was the pleasant old house where Kirinsky was born, now the Mongolian consul general; and here and there, soot and grime washed away by the melted snow, were other structures from the past which had been designed with care and an eye toward grace. If they did not make Tashkent a beautiful town, they did save it from being ugly.

Muslim monuments were far and few between.

True, in the middle of the rabbit warren of the main Uzbek makhala, or adobe brick and wattle Muslim settlements, there stands the handsome facade of the madrasa complex of the muftilik (or diocese/seminary) for all Muslims of Central Asia, and just outside the Char Su bazaar there is an old (and fetid-smelling) Turkish bath, but these few Muslim structures only serve to underline the fact that Tashkent was established as an imperial Russian town, and that even today, most of the Turkic Muslims living there are Russified Uzbeks.

The bazaar, I should mention, had none of the morphological structure that one usually associates with the concept of the oriental market: a huge, blue dome situated next to a series of walkways set in a grid, there was a cornucopia of food and spices, but little or none of the "stuff" that one associates with the bazaars in such cities as Istanbul, Damascus or Cairo. In terms of trinkets and curios, the only merchandize worth looking at were the rabbit fur hats, the pajama-like house coats favored by Uzbek and Tajik men as pocketless parkas, and cute little baby rockers with accompanying "piss pipes"--wooden devices to be strapped on to the urinary tracts of children so they might relieve themselves via a hole the crib and not on the sheets...

But the piles of fruit and vegetables were enough to give one pause--especially if one came from Moscow. One such gentleman, a pleasant enough reporter/informer charged with showing a crew from National Geographic around the area, was nearly insane with jealousy when comparing the meagre fare available in Moscow with the abundance on the streets of Tashkent and Samarkand.

Prices could be (relatively) steep: slabs of beef and lamb were selling for 18 rubles a kilo, or about \$4 at the official exchange rate (but less than a dollar at the black market exchange). In real (that is local) terms, this was high, representing about a tenth of

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the monthly wage of, say, one of the floor ladies in the hotel. Lemons from Tajikistan were selling for 5 rubles apiece, but still attracting great interest.

The usual explanation for this abundance of food is predicated on a couple of different factors. The first is that Central Asia enjoys a temperate climate and a long growing season, unlike most of Russia proper. The second is that as part of Glasnost, local collective farmers have been allowed to plant and harvest their own small plots, and with great effect. The third is that locals never really became industrial workers, and have thus always been able to cull (none dare say 'steal') produce from the collective farms to market themselves. Too, on a subjective level, I think it can be maintained that the Russian communists never managed to wholly extirpate the native sense of Wheeling-dealing middlemanship that has been a nearly genetic part of the make-up of Central Asian and Muslim society since the Prophet Muhammad encouraged believers to seek trade "as far as China".

As a matter of course and on the theory that it reflects the overall culinary level of any given society, I had to try all the street-food I could find. It was available and it was acceptable, if not particularly varied or good.

The most immediate was the national dish--plov, or pilav. Cooked in great vats over a gallon of grease, the spicy rice was doffed by chunks of meat, but after three or four servings of the self-same stuff, it got a bit redundant. The street kebabs were more of the same: sometimes grilled but usually deep-fried in what I understand was cotton oil, they were grease-bombs and lacked the sort of attention that one expects from a shish-kebab in Turkey or elsewhere in the Middle East. There were also manti, or ravioli-like meat-buns, although much larger than those I was familiar with in Turkey, as well as diced green radish and turnip salads which, I was told, derive from the Korean kitchen imported along with the 200,000 ethnic Koreans brought to Uzbekistan by Stalin in one of his more wistful moods in shuffling populations. 40,000 now live in Tashkent, and they are said to have enriched "Uzbek" cuisine considerably.

There is also a private Korean restaurant in town called, strangely enough, The Peking. I sought it out one night and was deposited at a small, pagoda-like building with Korean characters written over the foyer, but once inside I was informed that the building had just become a private bank (!) and that the restaurant had moved elsewhere.

Finding the other private restaurants in Tashkent was also problematic, but in the end, I succeeded in discovering two, and they were both well-worth the effort expended in tracking them down (quite a task with no advertisements or signs, believe you me!)

The first was the Cafe Ukraina, located in the basement of an apartment building about 20 minutes walk from the hotel, if one knew exactly where to go. I got lost every time I went, stretching the outward bound trip to around an hour.

The restaurant was established a few years ago and quickly became the favorite gathering point for Tashkent's ever-diminishing Jewish population as well as other 'liberal' thinkers and, inevitably, mafia-

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types (often indistinguishable from 'liberal thinkers' in the context of the Soviet state).

To be honest, it was not exactly the Russian Tea House on 57th street, or even the Odessa down in Manhattan's East Village, and the several televisions blaring MTV tapes in the corner gave it only a marginally lower decibel level than that in restaurants of the Hotel Uzbekistan. But the Cafe Ukraina had that special something lacking in every state restaurant I had put my nose into: it was *gemütlich*. It was warm. It was human.

The food, too, smacked of individual kitchen care and not just mass-produced crap. On my several visits, I had delicious cold cuts (including the 'national' specialty, *kazik*, or horse-flesh sausage); a beef steak with potatoes and gravy and a crisp salad (sound bland? not compared with the state-run fare!) and then some distinctly Ukrainian dish the name of which I don't know, wherein a slab of meat is wrapped around a core of cheese and then roasted, all washed down with--what else? iced vodka. Service was friendly and efficient: the waiters were working for tips, illegal in state-run restaurants.

Writing these notes now, it occurs to me that I might have gotten a little too excited by the place simply because it was such a relief to find it, and that the establishment wouldn't last a day in the face of real competition.

But it was there when I needed it, and I have to congratulate myself just a tad in seeking it out as a tonic for psychic ills: none of the other foreigners in town, including a couple of American scholars, had ever heard of the Cafe Ukraina (or any other private restaurants) and were deeply jealous of my ability to discover a Tashkent different from their own.

And the restaurant also served as a venue for human contact.

My initial visit was on my own, but once there I met some folks who invited me back for two more social gatherings and parties, the last a birthday party for an Armenian gal. The other guests--all around 20 years of age--were two Russian girls, a Jewish gal, two Tatar lasses and then a knot of young bucks, most of whom said they were Uzbek. The young Jewish gal, named Julie, spoke some English, but the basic medium of exchange was Uzbek/Turkish/Tatar. I made the party happen when I presented the birthday girl with a stick of Maybaleen (sp?) lipstick.

It was through this connection that I was introduced, on my last night in town, to "the very best restaurant" in Uzbekistan. The two Tatar girls and Julie picked me up on the side of the hotel (they would not come in nor take a taxi in front of the hotel lest they be regarded as whores) and then whisked me away to the far side of town. There, under a bridge and behind an unprepossessing street kebab stand, and further obscured by mounds of concrete, was "Regants" (if I recall the name correctly), advertised by a wooden slab on the door. A couple of guys were hanging outside the entrance, and for a second, I wondered if I had been set up and was about to be mugged. Then the door opened and light flooded out into the gloom and we entered a very, very different world.

Again, it is easy to exaggerate the charms of the establishment out of context. But in context, with the reality of the gloomy streets of

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Tashkent just instants behind, it was heaven. It was clean. It was tastefully decorated. There were napkins on the tables, and clean and starched table clothes. The room itself was split into a main dining area with perhaps ten tables, and then four or five alcoves, discretely curtained off from the body of the main room. We disappeared into one of these, and a great feast commenced, interrupted only by some guy with the generic name of Sasha, a black marketeer who I assumed to be a friend of my girlfriends' (now seven in number). When disabused of this idea, I ejected the fellow, although he was very insistent to rekindle our deep friendship by bringing back a bottle of vodka and then a flask of Moldavian brandy.

We never got to the main course! the zarkoska, or appetizers, being sufficient for an army. I even had Siberian crab, and, most remarkable of all, delicious white cheese. Calling for the bill at the end of the evening, I shelled out the 178 ruble tab, and then rounded it off to 200, with the tip: at the official exchange rate this would be around \$40; at the real exchange rate, it amounted to a ten spot.

There were other discoveries, too, usually through a new friend or connection.

Sergii #1 of the Three Sergiis, took me skiing one Saturday to a mountain resort about an hour outside of town. Although pretty rudimentary (and a little limiting given the fact that he had only one pair of boots which we were obliged to share) it was very relaxing. The mountain, I should note, was crowded with Russian skiers from all over the Soviet Union, acting pretty much like a bunch of American skiers at Vale or Aspen, and unusual only in the sense that it was so unexpected.

Russians (or Soviets) having fun?

I thought the country was supposed to be falling apart!

Later, Sergii took me back to the aforementioned Sauna restaurant for lunch, and then on another day, to another free-market restaurant area in the makhale behind the bazaar. Here, an entire street of once illegal grilled-meat eateries is now openly competing with the state sponsored shops next door. Guess where folks flock.

And there were others, too, who began making the human environment attractive indeed, to the point where one could start to disregard the overwhelming sense of urban blight and decay.

First and foremost was one Kahramon Rakhmoanov, the director of the city government's foreign relations desk. Formerly with Tashkent Radio, and an interpreter in Syria, he has near-native American English as well as fluent, literary Uzbek—a rarity among the Uzbek elite.

I had obtained his name and number while in Seattle, but ended up simply stumbling into him at what I thought was the central police station while attempting to find the Seattle doctors, Rash and Joyce Doan. In the event, we spent a few evenings seeking truth in the bottom of a vodka bottle, and a few days running around town to meet friends who he thought might be helpful to my project. He was also quite blunt about what he would do if he were in my shoes: Turkic Central Asia? Two years? Well, six months in Tashkent, and then out—a month or two in Khiva, Samarkand, Kokand and Bukhara, followed by six months in Kirghizia, another six in Turkmenia, another six in

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Kazakistan, or perhaps a year there, and then several week or fortnightly visits to little pockets of Turkishness scattered from Moldavia in the West to Siberia in the East...

On our final evening together, he brought me home to a little party at his place, attended by his radio announcer wife, kids, and in-laws, one of whom was an opera singer belting out Verdi for our edification. The opera singer's daughter, a lovely, bashful 12 year old gal, is to star as Sean Connery's child-bride in a joint Uzbek/Italian/American feature film on the life of Tamerlane...(another newsletter, of course!)

Another pleasant human contact was with the small group of Americans in Tashkent, most of them resident in the city through the Seattle/Tashkent sister city connection.

They were an odd group, split about evenly between those in town to learn Russian and those in town to study things Uzbek. One young guy, by the name of Will, appeared to have near native Uzbek, and in dialects (which I thought he was a little too obsessive about). We spent quite a bit of time together, including a dinner at his "parents" home in a makhale on the edge of town, as well as with a couple of young guys from Indiana University who were holed up in a squalid graduate students' dorm associated with the Academy of Science. One of them, David, seemed to have gone native along the line of Will, and was perfectly comfortable with Uzbek, while the other, John, came from the other side of the linguistic spectrum, IE, he was able to pull apart the most convoluted grammatical constructions possible, but could not ask directions on the street. I also spent the day with a Seattle couple who I will call Alan and Pat who had opted for the "Russian" side of things, and seemed to live in an irrational terror of the Uzbeks in their neighborhood.

There were others, too--Diana, a gal from Oregon who had just popped up to teach English and learn Uzbek from scratch, as well as a couple of other American gals who were teaching English in exchange for residency permits and whose aim was to study Russian.

The center piece of the American community, though, were the Doans--Rosh and Joyce, who act as the effective American Consul General in Uzbekistan. I think I will leave their story for another day, as it is the culmination of the Seattle/Tashkent sister city relationship, and that alone deserves a newsletter. Suffice it to say that the presence of such good and level-headed folks in Tashkent is pretty reassuring.

My presence, too, was warmly felt, especially in my departing: I left with over 20 pounds of mail from all the Americans in town, including some cancerous cell-tissues for the doctors of Seattle. It gives one a pretty good idea about how reliable the postal system is.

What else?

Much else--a trip to Samarkand, an aborted mugging, the subway system--but I will close this epistle now and save the other themes for future issues.

Best Regards,

Thomas Goltz

Received in Hanover 3/14/91