Russia

Two encounters with Nikita Khrushchev

LESLIE STEVEN ROTHENBERG

MEPHISTOPHELES: How closely linked are Luck and Merit,
Is something fools have never known.
Faust, GOETHE

It was 1959, and I was a naive 18 year old kid from a small town in West Virginia. I was not familiar with international diplomacy and world affairs, but I was beginning my first college term at the University of Pittsburgh in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, some 60 miles from my home. In addition, I was eager to join the student newspaper as a cub reporter.

On the 23 September I presented myself at the office of the university's student newspaper, *The Pitt News*, to offer my meagre credentials (a prep school class in journalism and practical experience as a writer and editor for the school newspaper and the school yearbook). Then I begged for a chance to prove my potential. An unimpressed student editor told me that all new people on the paper began by rewriting press releases, not to get my hopes up for anything exciting, and to come around at 8 o'clock the following morning if I was still interested.

Disappointed at the thought of starting at the bottom again but ever hopeful I arose the next morning, skipped breakfast and the morning newspaper, and rushed to the newspaper office to meet the 8 o'clock deadline. When I arrived I found the door open and the lights on, but no one in the office. Thinking that they had gone out for a moment, I sat down and waited. About 10 minutes later the telephone rang.

It rang six or seven times before it occurred to me (in my eagerness to be a part of the newspaper) that perhaps I could abandon etiquette, answer the phone, and take a message. Picking up the phone, I heard a woman's voice. When I told her that nobody was in the office at present and offered to take a message, she anxiously asked: "Do you work for the *Pitt News*?"

I said, honestly, that it was my first day on the job. With even more anxiety she blurted out: "Well, I don't know if you're aware who's coming to visit the campus this morning, but if you want to endear yourself to that newspaper you'll get over to my office immediately. The *Pitt News* has been promised the chance to have one reporter accompany the family during their visit to the campus, but the Secret Service needs to clear that individual by no later than 8 30 am. So get over here now!"

It took me about one millisecond to decide where my duty lay. Racing to her office, I wondered how I would explain this to the editor I was supposed to meet, but decided that I would either win a position by my initiative in responding to an emergency or lose it by my presumptuousness in posing as a reporter.

All this excitement was centred on His Excellency Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, First Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party since 1953 and Chairman of the Council of Ministers (Premier) of the USSR since 1958. His official visit to the United States in the fall of 1959 included a much publicised meeting with President Dwight D Eisenhower at Camp David, Maryland; a widely reported statement of his displeasure in being refused permission to visit Disneyland in California; and a tour of the United States that included a half day stop in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The reason for his Pittsburgh visit was in large part related to the survey of Soviet higher education done in 1958 by the University of Pittsburgh's chancellor, Edward H Litchfield, and his reciprocal invitation to Khrushchev to view American universities. It was Khrushchev's only visit to a university during his 1959 US tour.

Family visit

The premier was travelling with his family, in itself a newsworthy event because it marked the first time that a Soviet leader's family had accompanied him on a state visit. The family included his wife, Nina Petrovna Khrushchev, who had taught political economy in an adult school, and their three children: Sergei, an aviation engineer, and two daughters, Rada and Julia. The younger daughter, Rada, was accompanied by her husband, Aleksei Adzhubei, who four months earlier had been named editor in chief of the Soviet government newspaper, *Izvestia*, second in importance and circulation only to *Pravda*, the official Communist Party paper.

Accompanying the family that morning were the wives of Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and US Ambassador to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge, an interpreter, and several policewomen and security personnel. Chancellor Litchfield's wife was the official hostess. After receiving the necessary clearance I accompanied the family and its entourage as they visited a children's hospital and then the university campus.

I was very struck by Mrs Khrushchev. Her critics had described her as the stereotypical Soviet farmer's wife, with dowdy clothes and an indifferent hairstyle—which was true enough as far as appearance went. Yet beyond that I saw a very grandmotherly looking, always smiling woman with a serenity that seemed quite natural. She listened carefully to the descriptions of what she was shown and constantly found a kind word for everyone she met. She had a humility about her that I hadn't expected. It seemed as if she was not used to being in the limelight and couldn't understand why all these people were bothering themselves about her and her family.

At one point in her tour I was permitted to walk with her, and I asked her a question in English about her reactions to the United States. Before her interpreter could respond she answered me directly in heavily accented but grammatically correct English. That told me that I might be able to talk with her without using the official interpreter, who was clearly controlling the questions put to her.

My opportunity came a bit later. At one point as we were walking I was the only student with her party and she was obviously very comfortable with young people and very approachable. The interpreter had fallen behind, and I moved forward next to Mrs Khrushchev and began a conversation. We spoke for several minutes about superficial topics and then I asked her where she had learnt her English. She told me that she had studied it long before while preparing to be a teacher, and that she had brushed up on her vocabulary in preparation for this trip. Hesitantly I then asked whether it had ever occurred to her to teach English to her husband.

Time to reply

She smiled at me and, speaking softly, admitted that she *had* taught her husband English, but that he preferred to have everything translated into Russian because it gave him extra time to consider his reply. A dozen other questions formed in my mind, but at that moment I was brushed aside as others wished to speak with her. I knew that I had had an exceptional opportunity in those few minutes of direct conversation, sensing that she had trusted me with a family secret of sorts. Whether I was acting appropriately as a would be reporter was less important at that moment than the heady feeling of privileged access and rapport I felt.

I was permitted to meet Premier Khrushchev (who arrived after his family's campus tour) for about five minutes. The security people were surrounding him, and I was absolutely tongue tied. We exchanged a few trivial questions and answers through his interpreter, and I was tempted to ask him about his knowledge of English, but hesitated out of concern that I was betraying a confidence.

That brief interview was followed by a two hour official lunch in the student union ballroom with 500 guests, including this *Pitt News* representative. I was seated near enough to the head table to observe a young woman, Donna Armonas of Cleveland, Ohio, approach Premier Khrushchev and ask for his help in securing permission for her mother and brother, then living in Lithuania, to emigrate to the United States. Through his interpreter, Khrushchev said: "Little girl, you can expect your mother back very soon." I learnt later that the appeal was not as spontaneous as it initially appeared. The girl and her father, with the help of several newspaper editors, had earlier obtained an offer to intervene by Pennsylvania's governor, David L Lawrence, who was sitting at the head table with Khrushchev—which explained why the security people allowed Miss Armonas, accompanied by a Cleveland newspaperman, to approach the head table.

The Premier was in excellent form that afternoon, combining jokes about his hosts with serious predictions about the Soviet Union surpassing the United States in industrial growth. For a well known atheist he was even generous with his casual references to God, possibly for effect. "We will catch up with you, salute you, and pass on ahead," he said, adding, "Let us compete, and may God give us the strength to solve matters by reason and not by force."

Within minutes of the luncheon's conclusion the Khrushchev party was driven away to the airport and to their next destination, Washington, DC. The crowds in Pittsburgh, both on the streets and at the lunch, had been very warm in their response to the visit (Khrushchev received four standing ovations that day), and it was clearly a historic experience. Measuring it in terms of other local events, one newswriter said that the visit created even more excitement than the university football team's 1958 upset victory (29-26) over Notre Dame.

My journalism career, such as it was, was not ended by that day's

events. I was allowed to write up the story of the Lithuanian girl's appeal to Khrushchev at the luncheon, and the editors printed it on the front page with my name in the by line. Another story, without a by line, appeared on an inside page, detailing the family's visit to the campus, but omitting the conversation with Mrs Khrushchev. The experience stimulated me to consider a career in journalism, but other events intervened in the fulfilment of the goal. Yet the Khrushchev visit was undoubtedly the highlight of my short journalistic career.

Resignation and death

Khrushchev was forced by his fellow politburo members to resign his posts in October 1964, and he died on 11 September 1971 at the age of 77. His obituary in Moscow simply referred to "personal pensioner" Nikita Khrushchev, marking the obscurity he had been given since his forced retirement in 1964. He was buried in the second ranking burial site in Moscow, the Novodevichy cemetery next to a former convent. A soviet artist, Ernst Neizvestny, who had been berated publicly by Khrushchev for his work, offered to create a bust for his grave, and the family commissioned him to do so. The sculpted head was placed on his grave in September 1974.

By another coincidence, I was in Moscow in April 1975, accompanying the then attorney general (chief legal representative and adviser) of California, Evelle J Younger, and his wife on a visit to the Soviet Union. I told Attorney General and Mrs Younger of my meeting with the Khrushchevs and asked their indulgence if I took a few minutes to pay my respects at his grave. They willingly agreed. I explained that Khrushchev was still a "non-person" in his country, even in death, and that for that reason and the fact that his grave site was undoubtedly not an approved tourist site our assigned Intourist guide might not want to take us. Because Intourist was treating us as VIP guests (in apparent response to the Soviet government's interest in the state of California) I had developed a strategy to cope with the expected refusal, and thus I asked them to bear with me when I insisted.

On Sunday morning our Intourist driver and guide picked us up at our hotel. The guide was a young, unfriendly woman who had already planned an itinerary for us. When we were in the car and on our way I winked at the Youngers and announced to the guide that we wanted to go to the Novodevichy cemetery to visit the grave of former Premier Khrushchev.

Her face turned ashen, and she began a rapid fire conversation in Russian with the driver. Then she said: "It's impossible, out of the question!" Having planned my response carefully, I looked straight at the guide and spoke slowly and firmly: "If we are not taken immediately to the Novodevichy cemetery and shown the grave of Premier Khrushchev you are to immediately return us to our hotel and explain later to your superiors why we stopped touring this morning."

This led to at least three minutes of anxious conversation between driver and guide, and an announcement that we would be taken to the cemetery. As I had hoped, the alternative of our not touring had even worse potential consequences for our guide in the eyes of her superiors, but she made her point once we arrived. Taking us to the middle of the cemetery, she pointed to a far corner where a gold coloured bust was visible, and said simply: "There!" Then, quickly leaving us, she walked back to the car. We spent a few minutes at the grave site, and I silently recalled the 1959 conversations.

In August 1984 Mrs Khrushchev died at the age of 84. She also was referred to in the Moscow newspapers as a "personal pensioner" under her maiden name of Kukharchuk and, it is reported, she was buried beside her husband.

The photographs of Mr and Mrs Khrushchev are reproduced by courtesy of the University of Pittsburgh archives; that of Mr Khrushchev's tomb was supplied by Topham Picture Library.

Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, Department of Medicine, UCLA School of Medicine, Los Angeles, CA 90024-1690, USA
LESLIE STEVEN ROTHENBERG, JD, adjunct associate professor of medicine

A stay in a central Soviet hospital

L W LAUSTE

I was visiting Mongolia with a colleague when I contracted an acute respiratory infection which led to my admission to hospital in Irkutsk in Soviet Central Asia. This is the first year that Mongolia has allowed individual tourists, and the object of our tour was to see a little of the country and the people. We visited Inner Mongolia and the Grasslands and continued by train to Ulan Bator, the capital of Mongolia. Outer Mongolia was under Russian rule from 1924 and became independent in 1945 under the Yalta Sino-Russian agreement; but it still has a large Russian presence, which the people resent but cannot oppose. They are intensely nationalistic, with their own language, currency, postage, time, and now developing industry, although most of the people are still nomads, living in yurts. The main attraction in Outer Mongolia is Karakorum—the military capital established by Genghis Khan in 1220 and now but a heap of stones.

When we returned to Ulan Bator from visiting Karakorum there was bright sunshine but a cold wind, and that evening I became ill with a severe respiratory infection, probably spreading from a mild tracheitis I had had for two or three days. Clearly I could not continue the tour to Irkutsk by train as planned but I thought I could make the journey to London by air. We got seats on the plane to Irkutsk—a short and easy journey, but it proved too much for me. Once at a hotel in Irkutsk I agreed that the doctor should be called. Two young doctors came and said—as I knew they would—that I should go to hospital. I was admitted with what proved to be lobar pneumonia and stayed there three weeks.

Care and comfort

My medical care was excellent. The day after admission my chest was radiographed, an electrocardiogram was done, and blood was taken for various tests. Curiously no sputum was sent for culture or urine examined until two days later. I cannot speak of the standard of x ray equipment or films, but the apparatus certainly worked without trouble, and the electocardiograph had as many leads as Dr Douglas Chamberlain has on his machines. Repeat blood examinations were done twice and a repeat radiograph and electrocardiogram were performed two weeks later.

I was under the care of a physician—a pleasant woman of