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AUTHOR: John Anthony Dahms

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Leaves from the diary of an intelligence-minded interpreter with expertise in industrial matters.

SHEPHERDING A SOVIET TOUR

John Anthony Dahms

The main job of the interpreter accompanying a Soviet delegation around this country is to facilitate communication. He should not be so loaded with other assignments that he reaches the point of exhaustion in which, as a Soviet interpreter once put it, he feels like a wise dog—he understands everything but cannot say a word. Yet if he keeps it a secondary function he can elicit, and help in the elicitation of, useful information, a good deal more these days than in the first years of the exchange program.¹ Sometimes he stumbles on it; sometimes he works for it and succeeds, sometimes fails. And exceptionally he may be deluged with more than he can absorb. How he goes about it can most easily be shown by holding up some pages from his life.

Paducah

As I near the top of the temporary ladder leading to the second floor of the new Paducah city hall, open to the sky during construction, the December fog from the Ohio river is so thick that I cannot see whether the two missing members of the Soviet delegation are there. Twisting around on the top rung, I now spot the two ghostly figures at the far end of the building—and simultaneously slip and nearly tumble. I picture the headline in the Paducah paper: "State Department Interpreter Breaks Leg in Fall: John Dahms, who accompanied the Soviet delegation of 12 construction specialists to dams and construction sites around Paducah, is said to be in satisfactory condition after . . ."

The slip is a warning that I am overanxious. The reason for my eagerness is that these two Soviets, the most communicative of the 12, for the moment are alone. All week the head of the delegation, Andrei Schepetyev, has blocked my every move to talk to them without his supervision. Here is my chance. As I approach them amid the pipes, conduits, and construction debris, I can tell

¹ Cf. Francis Agnor, "The Interpreter as an Agent," *Studies* IV 1, p. 21 ff.

from their stance and dramatic gestures that their conversation is of the heart-to-heart kind. Now I can hear it.

Pravilno, pravilno! Girenko is agreeing with something. The big man of magnetic personality is head of some 400,000 construction workers in the South Ural economic district, a gold-starred Hero of the Soviet Union, and a delegate to the Supreme Soviet.

"I told them, I wrote them; but it did no good," protests Denyega, an idealistic, obstinate, and bitter Ukrainian whose job is to coordinate the production of construction machinery throughout the USSR. He is thirty-seven but looks fifty. The head of the delegation appears to hate him.

From the commodious pockets of my trenchcoat, from among the neosynephrine, aspirin, cough drops, and indigestion pills there, I take a small box of chocolates which were to have been my breakfast (try ordering for a dozen hungry Russians in Paducah when they want real Central Asian *kefir* and won't settle for buttermilk or even yogurt) and hold it out to them. "Chocolates, Pavel Gavrilovich, Andrei Yermolayevich?" With an automatic *spasibo* they munch the candy and continue talking. Denyega, I learn, has written a report in which he is going to take on the entire Gosstroy chain of command and doesn't care what happens.

Drug moi, proshu vas ochen—ne goryachites. Like an old coach calming down his star player, Girenko in his velvety basso tells his friend not to get excited and act rashly because he will only hurt himself. Denyega gives a frustrated kick at an imaginary impediment, then reluctantly concedes, "You are right. But how long do we have to wait? It is not for me. It is for the good of all."

"You can be sure," answers Girenko with great power of persuasion in his voice, "that soon there will be changes. Enormous changes. Life demands it. But right now be calm and do not criticize them."

"Them," I think, the insiders, the politicians. I interrupt. "I am glad I found you. Shepetyev worries when you are missing."

"Let him. We are not children," says Denyega, just as I expected.

"May I ask you, is this building of interest to you? It is old-style custom construction, monumental type. The last delegation from Gosstroy that I had was only interested in mass production methods, prefabricated parts and all that."

"That's absolutely wrong," says Denyega, and Girenko nods. "If our responsible people were not so blinded by dogmatics, they would learn much here—they would see our weaknesses."

"What do you mean?"

"Rhythm, Ivan Antonovich. Rhythm."

I am puzzled, and both smile at me. "Better speak Russian, not construction jargon," suggests Girenko, lighting another Russian long cigarette.

"Look!" Denyega paints his dream, "The second floor is put on top of the first with all the electrical conduits and outlets, all the pipes already in place. The building emerges from the ground a logical organic whole—like a squash coming up from the earth. The carpenters, masons, electricians, assistants, truckers all work in rhythm doing the right thing at the right time—like players in a symphony, like our great Moscow orchestra under Kondrashin. Have you heard him? Now do you understand?"

I say I do but I already knew that some buildings were quickly assembled in the USSR out of prefabricated parts. What's wrong?

Again they smile at my naivete. "True we put a building together. But it is only the shell. Then come the pipefitters and poke it full of holes. Then the electricians and make more holes, then the plumbers who usually flood it for you," explains Denyega.

"And chip off all the plaster!" breaks in Girenko. "So before your customer will sign the acceptance you practically have to refinish the whole building, and then explain the delay to the bank and a myriad of supervisors. Oh, Ivan Antonovich, you have no idea what unpleasant negotiations one has to carry on! You know I have an ulcer, don't you?"

"Not only buildings; even roads. Remember the road?" asks Denyega, beginning to laugh.

"Yes, the road!" roars Girenko, and then the two of them, interrupting each other and doubling over with laughter, gasp out the story of how 500 kilometers of a highway Girenko had just built were torn up so that telegraph wires could be placed under it.

I realize that I am witnessing a rare moment of purgation—accumulated frustration suddenly expressing itself in near-hysteria. I play along. "I understand that under your system each enterprise makes its own plans and sends them to Gosplan for approval. What goes wrong?"

"Gosplan—those mother-rapers!" explodes Denyega.

"Our cross and crown of thorns," says Girenko, rolling his eyes to the foggy sky.

"We in Washington are accustomed to thinking of them as top experts surrounded with computers, etc. Are we mistaken?"

"Partly. They have good engineers, good staff. But key decisions are often made by unqualified people at the top. Overall planning devitalizes the individual building organizations. Here your contractors do what common sense tells them. We frequently can not. That is our grief. It is not your factories and engineers that impress me," continues Denyega. "Man for man, plant for plant, we are as good as you are. But in system of management—here you have something we should take lessons in."

"Ach, we know all this," Girenko says. "We didn't have to come to America to see the changes that are needed. Life demands them. Life teaches us. It is just a question of time, we will make them. And then, mark my words, we will catch up with you."

At this juncture the head of the delegation comes climbing up and slips on the same rung I did. It does not improve his humor. "Well, have you found anything useful?" he asks Denyega and Girenko.

"Not very much . . ."

"Then why waste time?"

"Well, not utter waste. Note here—they use stamped pipe clamps. We still cast them. It is cheaper their way," says Denyega.

"Aha, Aha!" Shepetyev is pleased and tells the secretary, Kazarinov, always at his elbow, to note the name and location of the factory that makes this minor item. "Now please, Ivan Antonovich, do stay at my side," he turns to me. "My colleagues need you. What were you discussing here so long?"

"The delegates very kindly explained some facts about building planning that confused me."

"Later, later, I will personally explain and answer all your questions. They are not specialists in this field and should not try to educate you. I am the specialist. I will talk to you later. But right now please work with me. Every minute is valuable. This trip is very expensive and we are not rich like you. Shall we go?"

Some Notes and Thoughts

At the airport I quickly make notes on the conversation, and then I test my recall from brief notes I took about a week ago on another incident involving Denyega.

My notes, like those of most interpreters trained by the State Department, are based on the principle of Egyptian ideographs with a few key words, letters, or symbols added. In the twinkling of an eye a whole idea or incident can thus be recorded. This method releases the interpreter's attention for listening and comprehending. Of course it takes practice. The principles of interpreting impressed on us in the instruction are the following:

Learn to listen; subordinate yourself. Listen for the ideas, to what the man is selling, not what he is saying. Interpret the man's ideas rather than his words whenever possible. Make your notes suggestive, to stimulate your memory. These personal reminders will also be secure.

Now I am pleased that I seem to recall fully the week-old incident from just a few ideographs and words and can compare it with what just happened at Paducah city hall. Here is how it goes.

The letter *L* and the symbols *3/12, yd.* tell me that on 3 December 1963 we were at the Lorain factory near Cleveland which makes cranes, and the incident took place in the yard. A crudely drawn fish skeleton and the words *Loch Ness, tubular, 250' welded* remind me that we were looking at a tower of a crane 250 feet high made of welded tubular steel instead of the usual riveted flat members. It therefore had unusual lightness and strength. And it did look to me like the skeleton of a Loch Ness Monster.

The letters *D, K, O*, and the word *Gosplan* with a line through it mean that Denyega, Kazarinov, and an engineer named Ozerov who builds cranes assured me they knew of such crane construction and wanted to build some, but Gosplan objected. Or, rather, it upheld the steel industry, which did not want to have to make a special small production run for the tubing.

Uralmash=Henry Ford "T" tells how, when I asked the engineers why they could not place an order with say the famous Uralmash, they replied that this wealthy combine, with its own sanatoria and a huge director's fund from which special bonuses can be given its employees, is slow to change models and so makes a lot of money but produces machinery they considered obsolete. I thought of Henry Ford clinging to his Model T and making quite a few millions by not changing.

The last symbol is a book with the letter *K*. This is my observation that Kazarinov, the secretary, who at home is a senior engineer at Gosstroy and tests all the foreign machinery for it (to compare it

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with the Soviet, he says)—this Kazarinov, with a face like Shostakovich and as tall and lean as an Olympic track star, is a fabulous note-taker. Looking over his shoulder I see that he too uses symbols and ideographs, and he is a marvelous sketcher. When he cannot take pictures (as he does by the hundreds) or get photos or drawings from the plant, he takes notes in order to make sketches later. "The design of this connector is so interesting," he confides with a happy smile.

I bet he will have an almost 100-percent recall of every plant layout, dam site, and construction project we visited, as well as design features of new machinery. But I note that the Americans shy away from telling him everything. Usually they hold back about steel specifications. Maybe this is one reason the Soviets still have to buy U.S. technical data and know-how.

St. Louis

Six months later, in the summer of 1964, I am in St. Louis with another delegation. A high-powered one, it includes: Novikov, head of Gosstroy and deputy to Khrushchev in the Council of Ministers; Neporozhny, top man on electrification and builder of the Aswan Dam, just back from a visit to Egypt with Khrushchev; several Ministers of Construction from large republics; Petya Chernyshev, builder of the largest turbines for electric generators and a recent Hero of the Soviet Union. The last is a pudgy, nervous, pleasant young man who speaks in snatches. His hands testify that he did indeed start his career as a lathe operator at the plant where he is now the principal engineer.

I no sooner step into the hotel than I am told to call a number in Washington "no matter what the time is." I recognize the number as that of my backstop, Sean. I cannot make the call until 2:30 A.M. Reason: his most communistic majesty Ignaty Trofimovich Novikov chooses to have tantrums and summons me and the tour manager to his suite and bawls us out because no crowds, no VIP's, no press and photographers met him at the airport. He had wanted to make a speech on Soviet-USA friendship there at eleven o'clock at night in a pouring rain. We express anguish at his displeasure, promise to phone Washington, and hope to do better in the future. Thanks to Neporozhny we are dismissed with a conciliatory pat on the back and a tumbler of Ukrainian vodka aptly called *Gorilka*, the Burner.

Then I get Sean out of bed and get the news, which is good. The host company has been briefed by the local CIA office and is

cooperating fully in the effort to get answers to intelligence questions. A young engineer named Joe is the key man, and I should work with him. I have seen the questions, and they are good. They are clear, logical, and not probing sensitive matters about which a delegate cannot tactfully be asked. Enough background is given for the questioner to understand the problem. Petya (the Turbine) Chernyshev is the main target.

The next morning finds me working without a break. Since the tour began, ten days ago, I have not asked a single question; but I have bought technical books² and periodicals as gifts, have given Neporozhny a plastic raincoat, have made some useful suggestions from prior experience in some of the areas visited—in short, I have put the Soviets under obligation to me. I have helped them and they know it.

I spot Joe easily. He is a smart young engineer, a turbine specialist. He and Petya enjoy talking to each other through me. But there never is an opportunity for them really to get together. The next day is the same. The third day it rains, and I am getting desperate. Nonetheless a part of the group goes out to a power plant under construction, puts on rubber boots, and sloshes through the foot-deep mud at the site.

As we start back Joe and I make our move. Joe says he wants Petya to ride with us. Petya is most agreeable, for he has questions on the huge new turbine he has seen. But the other Soviets raise a cry as if Petya is being kidnapped, and the Americans not in on the game side with them. Shortly everybody is hopping in and out of cars—a Mack Sennet comedy in the mud. I am getting dirty looks from everybody. Petya ignores them and gets into the car next to Joe, who is at the wheel. I get in and shut the door and we drive off. The others follow, then overtake us as we slow down for conversation.

Petya wants to know why the compressor is located where it is on the new turbine. A tough question, but Petya sketches the turbine and Joe explains why. Petya understands, takes notes, and begins to look like the cat that swallowed the canary. Then Joe asks him questions about *his* turbine and his problems with it. I suggest that he sketch it, pleading the very real difficulty of interpreting technical descriptions. Petya does; and presto he shows it

² Soviets were particularly interested in the "critical path method" of programming construction.

configuration, its size, the steam flow, and many other characteristics—everything we wanted to know.

Joe takes the sketch while driving. He glances at it, points to the exhaust, and says, "Tell him, John, there's where his trouble is." Petya turns beet-colored and bursts out with something incomprehensible, showering my face with saliva. Then he chokes with laughter as he wipes my face with his hand in a friendly Soviet way—"Tell him that I have trouble here too," and he points to the last section where the blades are longest. He says Joe is real bright and pats his shoulder. Joe says Petya is real bright and pats him back. He says both Westinghouse and General Electric had trouble on exactly these same spots when they were in the design stage. Petya asks about steels, and Joe tells him something but seems unable to recall the full answer.

Suddenly Joe honks madly. The lead car has forgotten to make a turn. Joe makes the turn, and soon we are driving along the Mississippi without the other car. Joe asks if Petya would like a ride to see another plant with an interesting water intake. Would he? Why it's the river of Mark Twain. He has read "Life on the Mississippi." So another hour of talk about turbines. The two promise to write to each other; Joe will send Petya some steel specifications when he finds them.

When we arrive at the hotel Novikov's personal secretary is standing at the entrance, angry and impatient. He demands what Petya was doing for such a long time. Petya pats the pocket where his notebook is with a happy expression and says he was learning things about turbines and viewing the Mississippi. "And how was it?" asks the secretary. "Wet," says Petya, and walks away.

Joe and I compare notes. He reveals *he* was the one that made the wrong turn—on purpose. He agrees to write a report for Washington. Petya is at least three—maybe four—years behind us, he says. But he is bright. If he knew English he would recommend the Company hire him. "He's no competition now, but he will be."

Schenectady

Although the people who work and live in Schenectady call it an ugly and dull company town, I found it a cool, immaculately kept little city, set in an emerald valley and having wide boulevards, magnificent factories, and a lovely old section of colonial homes with large neat lawns and flowering shrubs that have Georgetown

in D.C. beat all hollow. Furthermore, Neporozhny, his secretary, and Petya (the Turbine) Chernyshev, who were there with me on the closing days of their tour, agreed with me wholeheartedly.

When the tour of the factories was over we walked through this colonial section, and the Soviets daydreamed like kids, picking out which house they would like to live in. They praised Schenectady and the American engineers and managers and labor and General Electric and the whole United States. Schenectady and the Hudson river valley is just like countryside in the vicinity of Kiev, they said, admitting they were getting homesick.

Maybe Schenectady looked so good because all of us were happy, the Soviets with what they had learned and I with the facts I had gathered. For after St. Louis, and particularly after Los Angeles, mid-way in the tour—after I had taken care of Neporozhny when he fell ill and got him gratis a miracle-working doctor who had him back on his feet in one day—the tour became for me virtually a movable feast of facts and interpretations. My main frustration was inability to absorb all of the particulars and details that were thrust upon me from all sides; it is my practice not to take notes during such conversations. Consider the following:

Item one. The Minister of Construction from Kazakhstan, shaken by the colossal irrigation and flood-control works in southern California, began to tell me all about *his* irrigation scheme. The Minister from the Ukraine said his was much bigger, and both started reeling off names and details concerning the crash program that seems to be under way in the USSR. Neporozhny, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, said the program was drawn up personally by his friend Nikita Khrushchev, who sequestered himself a whole month at his dacha after the disastrous crop failure, helped by only one expert.

Item two. Neporozhny revealed to a host (who I could tell had been well briefed intelligence-wise) his problem with costs in electric power production, how they seem to be twice the average in the United States, and how all the turbines in the world will not lower them significantly as long as Gosplan makes the electric industry use the worst coal in the RSFSR so it can give the best to the chemical and steel industries. "Right now the chemists in the Soviet Union are Czar and God," he said. "I am having to use my cadres on building twenty factories for them."

Item three. At the amazing Enrico Fermi atomic plant in Detroit, again in Boston at an experimental plant that generates electricity

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directly from burning gases, and again in Schenectady the Soviet electric power specialists made no secret of their philosophy for expansion of the industry, their troubles with a long-range transmission system which they had been boosting for sale to the United States, the high cost of atomic fuel in the Soviet Union, apparently precluding large-scale commercial use until a fast breeder reactor is perfected, and their troubles with bursting boilers, symptomatic of the general stand-still in electrical engineering until there is a breakthrough in metallurgy. The American hosts agreed they had similar troubles; electricity knows no politics. But everywhere in this area we seem to be ahead, sometimes by a nose and sometimes by several lengths.

Item four. On one long flight I opened a gambit by saying I had not yet met a delegation that liked Gosplan. The delegates laughingly agreed and told the following story:

"We understand that the mythical figure Jesus Christ once worked an utterly improbable miracle; he fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fishes. Well, it might have been possible after all. He did not have the Gosplan allocating his material resources."

Then, referring to speeches of Novikov, I asked his secretary if Novikov was satisfied that he could bring about with his existing authority and organization the programmed improvements in the construction industry. "No," was the reply, "he has asked the Council of Ministers for some added powers, which Gosplan, headed by Lomako, now has."

For the next several hours, five miles up in the sky, I was afforded insight into the workings of the minds of the top Soviet echelon as the various Ministers dropped in on this bull session. They complained that insufficient funds are allocated for planning and supervision. "The difference between us and the Americans," said the six-foot-seven Minister from the Ukraine, "is that here they think before they start construction, and we afterwards." Even Novikov joined the party to remark that Ministers should merely execute orders while others—more intelligent people—do the thinking for them.

Last Flight

Mulling all this over at the Schenectady airport, I decide I should make one more try, for the answer to a question a colleague has asked about Soviet organization. So another gambit. I give Nepo-

activity with defense requirements. What kind of experts does Ustinov have? Neporozhny says Ustinov's staff is small but he calls in experts as needed. What kind, I ask.

The now familiar twinkle comes into Neporozhny's intense blue eyes. "Preference is given to ex-wrestlers," he says. "They grab the ministers by the scruff of the neck and seat of the pants, catch-as-catch-can fashion, and pull them off each other. For Ustinov is a small man and not very strong. Against a man like Novikov, who is a former coal miner, he wouldn't have a chance!"

Checkmate. I know when I'm licked and put the book away. I make a few notes, openly this time. Neporozhny continues to answer questions and talk freely on other problems of economic organization and management—industrial consolidation, capital formation, labor productivity, and its scarcity under the new priority for agriculture. When I ask how a central planning system can compensate for the lack of the built-in incentives to cut costs in a competitive system, he says, "Since you raise this question, you are the person best qualified to answer it. Come to Moscow and we will give you all the information needed for a comparative study."

"Do you think it would be useful?"

"I think," says Neporozhny, "the more meaningful fact is the suitability of a system to a people at their present stage of development. At one time your system gave you very rapid growth. Your mastery of technology is beyond what I imagined it to be; yet your growth has slowed down. Clearly something is wrong if, having such fine cadres of labor and engineers, such abundance of resources, and such a God-sent climate, you are not working at your highest potential. We are. Our growth is more rapid than yours. So Communism is in our blood and there can be no hint of a return to the past."

I explain that I was not thinking of that, but of the capacity of their system to evolve, as ours has also evolved. "Yes, we change," he replies. "So long as new ideas do not conflict with basic Marxism and dialectical materialism, we adapt them for our use. Notice I say adapt; we do not copy. Neither machinery nor ideas do we copy. All require adaptation before being incorporated in our system."

Neporozhny, who had been a professor of electrical engineering with many published works, says he became an industrialist when, under Khrushchev's reforms of 1957, a decision was made to have the economic life of the country run not by politicians but by top

specialists. I ask if Novikov is a PhD. Again sparks fly from Neporozhny's eyes and he cannot resist a witticism. "He is a political engineer," he says, leaving me to ponder the double meaning while his colleagues turn red.

Net Evaluation

The tour is over. At the Kennedy airport, as the delegation prepares to emplane, Novikov gets off his last speech before a few Americans, including the official State Department host. Compared with his initial speech a month ago, this shows him a changed man. He is more relaxed, far more thoughtful. The strident, self-confident style of the *udarnik*, the shock worker, is mercifully gone. He speaks of the usefulness of the tour, simply, with dignity and sincerity. He asks the Americans to come and visit the USSR, where they too may learn something. His talk of peace and friendship does not sound like propaganda. The dapper Ambassador Fedorenko, delegate to the UN, trembling in the presence of Novikov, translates his speech. He falters and I have the satisfaction of prompting him.

Later I shall see that Novikov gave a favorable and fair interview to *Pravda* on his return to Moscow. The main nonintelligence objective of the tour, its one really big purpose, has been accomplished: even a tough, doctrinaire Communist like Novikov has been deeply impressed by the United States. And this is the usual pattern for every delegation I have accompanied. At first impatience, braggadocio, suspicion, and unreasonable demands. Then the big thaw and a period of good feeling. Then the thoughtful, quiet parting, the warmth of a month's comradeship dissipated as the Soviets make ready to be whisked back into their perilous, rigid world.

What impressed them? Not only, I hope, our industrial might, roads, cars, real wages. I hope it is our people and their attitude towards life: the semi-employed workman speaking without embarrassment to a Minister about his car, his mortgage, his union benefits, his sons in school or in the army; the lovely air hostess who quickly learns enough Russian to offer them *kofe ili chai*; the soft-spoken colored porter who graciously refuses their tip; the earnest college students poring over books in the library.

As for the intelligence objective, the interpreter is greatly aided if there is no break in the question chain that originates with the specialists in Washington and ends with a cooperative host. The latter is in by far the best position to ask questions at the usual

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meeting winding up a plant visit. To the Soviets it seems only fair that reasonable questions should be put to them by Americans engaged in the same line of work. This then gives the interpreter an opening to follow up with more questions and develop the topic more fully. It is quite difficult—sometimes, with a hostile delegation, utterly impossible—for an interpreter to start the questions on his own.

Aside from factual information there is need for interpretive insight into what stands behind it. The integral meaning of what lies openly before us is probably one of the more important problems in Soviet studies today, and the interpreter who lives for a month with a Soviet group is in a good position to achieve some insight into deeper meanings.

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