Why I Wrote The Tinderbox Plot

In 1979, I was caught smuggling a false-bottom suitcase loaded with Jewish prayer books and Israeli literature into the Soviet Union. I’d arrived in Moscow to deliver a series of scientific lectures on laser biomedicine at Moscow State University (MSU). My passport was immediately confiscated by the KGB and I was interrogated by a pair of agents in a dingy, windowless room for several hours. The two agents stuck in my mind to this day, and the head guy was the basis for my Russian protagonist, Andrei Grushkov.

As a longtime fan of thrillers, I imagined these interrogators reporting to a boss like Karla, in John le Carré’s novel, *Smiley’s People*. I was afraid, but thrilled to be on such an adventure. It was my third trip to the Soviet Union to share information with Russian scientists on a worthy field of study, and I’d formed some good friendships and working relationships.

Why had I agreed to this dangerous “errand of humanity”? I think it was because of my Jewish guilt. I was not a religious Jew; I had not even had a bar mitzvah. But I was aware that, since the end of World War II, the Soviet Union had instituted repressive policies toward Soviet Jews who’d requested visas to emigrate to Israel. They were called “Refuseniks” by the Western press and supporters. I am child of the Cold War. My paternal great, great grandparents suffered the Russian pogroms in the 1880’s and my maternal great grandparents likely died in the Nazi concentration camps. I had a lifelong fascination with the Cold War period, and the morphing of the Soviet Union into Russia.

This is why, when a couple of activist students in my biology class at UC Irvine asked me to deliver Hebrew prayer books and literature about Israel to refusenik Russian Jews, I couldn’t be a “refusenik.” Because of my scientific successes, at the height of Cold War (1977-79) I was one of very few Americans allowed to visit many of the Soviet Republics; I lived in Kiev for two months, and was co-organizer of a laser medicine conference in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. I met many Russians: intellectuals, artists, common “people in the streets,” and of course the KGB agents who interrogated me as well as two female agents who were tasked with seducing me, though they were unsuccessful.

As this was my third trip to the USSR, I expected to pass through customs with little difficulty. Alas, this was not how it went down. A 12-hour marathon interrogation culminated with my signing a Russian confession, confiscation of my passport, and photographs taken of me in front of the material I was smuggling. But when I demanded to be put on the next plane out, my passport was returned and I was allowed to continue with my visit, without the smuggled material of course.

After delivering my lectures at MSU, I slipped away from my hosts (and the tailing KGB) and surreptitiously visited some of the refusenik families whose addresses I had been given. Though in retrospect I put myself as well as the families I visited in jeopardy, at the moment, I felt compelled to complete part of my mission—albeit without delivering the material that had been confiscated.
I found the Russians I met on this trip, and on my earlier visits, to be likeable and fascinating people. The scientists, their families, and the average person I met in restaurants and scantly stocked stores, were exceedingly nice and curious about America. One woman asked to meet me the next day in a park as she wanted to give me some pictures to take back to the US for a cousin that lived in San Diego. She was clearly scared about be caught, so she told me to ignore her as she approached if she held a newspaper under her left arm.

When I returned to the U.S., a representative from the CIA called me to learn about the details of my visit. He confirmed that during my stay in Moscow I’d been under constant surveillance. And (he) shed light on why women were thrown at me in my hotel at night; the KGB had apparently intended to compromise me. For a dedicated scholar and scientist, this was juicy stuff.

After the Jewish bible bust, I was never allowed to return to the Soviet Union but my interest in the culture, politics, and people in Russia never abated. Nor did my fascination with spy novels, and eventually, I decided to write one.

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