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A View From the Back of the Soviet Bus -- My Four Years on the Racial Firing Line

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BODY:
NOT LONG AGO, a black man got onto a crowded bus near the Kremlin and began reading a copy of Pravda. A Russian passenger ordered him to move to the back, saying, "We don't want anyone of your color even standing near us." As frequently happens in the Soviet Union, where hostility between the races runs pretty strong, a scuffle followed. The black grew angry. He forced the Russian into a corner and demanded an apology in a loud and bitter tone. The Russian turned red and started to sputter with rage. Before things got out of hand, a couple of bystanders moved in to break the whole thing up.

Over in five minutes, the conflict was easily forgettable; during the four years I lived and worked as a journalist in the Soviet Union, I witnessed many like it. But this time was different. This time, the black man was me.

There was another, more important, difference: Usually, as I made my way around the Soviet Union, I tried to observe incidents of racism dispassionately, from a distance. I saw them as strange customs you accept warily when traveling abroad, like the Mongolian practice of drinking horse's milk.

On that day, however, as I jostled among babushkas clutching bags of food for a place on the bus, I understood that standing in the background and watching racist practices was like watching a public stoning. I understood that what would be morally wrong in Dallas or Liverpool was no different here. I had long understood that racism rears its ugly head frequently and brashly in the course of daily life in Moscow, but this time I could no longer accept it.

When I returned to the United States, many Americans -- from my parents to strangers in audiences -- asked, "What was it like to be black there?" I rarely answered directly. My usual response was that as an American, a journalist from a well-respected newspaper and a fluent speaker of Russian, my status was special; I received different treatment from that given other blacks.

But that was only partially true. In fact, the vast majority of Russians I encountered, from peasants to diplomats, couldn't care less that I had an undergraduate degree in Russian language and a year as a student in Leningrad. Whether we were students from Cameroon, tourists from Brazil, ambassadors from sub-Saharan Africa, they treated us the same. And nothing prepared me for the racial attitudes I would encounter there.

In Tulsa, where I grew up, race relations were far from harmonious, but I never experienced a confrontation. At Phillips Andover, where I went to boarding school, the ratio of blacks to whites was 1-to-30. I recall only a single ethnic incident, when an Italian guy called a couple of Jewish students derogatory names. When I was the lone black in Uppingham, in England, a young girl harrassed me as I walked to chapel each morning: "Blackie," she would yell,

"Blackie."

By comparison, the Soviet Union was like an army firing line. There, locals frequently yelled out bitter slurs on the street. "Look," someone shouted from a passing car as I took a walk in a Moscow street with a Frenchwoman who was brownskinned. "Those are the kinds of people who have AIDS."

Even getting a taxi brought home the harsh reality, especially on winter nights when the temperature often dropped to 30 below zero and a foot of snow covered the ground. Drivers would frequently pull up close enough to get a look, to see my mustache frozen stiff and my eyes pleading. Then they would speed away.

For years, when questioned about Soviet racism, I would beg off. When first invited to write about it, I declined. I had thought a lot about the subject but refused to come to terms with it. The truth, I believed, was profoundly disturbing.

Like many Americans who spent their adolescence learning Russian language and literature, I saw Russia as the country that produced Pushkin (himself descended from Abyssinians), Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov. How could that nation father such wisdom on one hand and breed such contempt on the other?

Over time, I grappled with Soviet racial attitudes. Maybe, I thought, officials ignored me because they were too busy. Maybe children jeered because they do childish things. And maybe, after all, in their hearts, Russians were not like that. Maybe they were simply afraid of something they didn't know. I turned the possible reasons over and over in my mind, knowing that xenophobia, historically, was very strong in Russia.

When I talked to Soviet friends and acquaintances about the issue, their explanations -- and apologies -- were small comfort. "You don't understand racism here?" the Jewish writer Grigory Kanovichas told me in Vilnius several months ago. "The truth is, no one understands it. In fact, it is not to be understood. This is a country where people think that the color of a man's skin tells them everything they need to know about him. They look at a black and say, 'There goes a nigger.' How is that to be understood?" Once I stepped out of the streets of Moscow and into the parlors, I was viewed less as an alien and more as an enigma. I wondered why I provoked so much confusion: Was it because I am black or because I am American? Over time, I realized that it was because I am both, at once. As far as most Russians are concerned, a black American is a contradiction in terms. As a rule, they consider white Americans to be rich, happy-go-lucky and typically resembling the models for Ralph Lauren. Blacks, in contrast, are seen as criminal, jobless and preoccupied with scraping a living together. In their conception, the twain does not meet. I found this out in the hardest way possible.

It happened one afternoon when I was entertaining a Russian friend, Valery, a longtime refusenik. Finally granted political asylum, he was leaving the Soviet Union to live in the Washington area. After tea and small talk, we moved on to cognac and a swap of first impressions. Mine was simple: When we first met, I told him, I was touched by the sincerity of his quest to live in a democratic country. Valery leaned forward, signalling that a big confession was coming.

"To tell you the truth," he said, "I was shocked when I first saw you. I knew you by reputation, of course, because I heard many of your articles broadcast on Voice of America. But I never thought that Gary Lee could be a black person. With all of the unemployment there is in the United States, surely The Washington Post could have found a white person to send here as its bureau chief." He took a sip of cognac and smiled.

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean," I said.

"It's very simple," he replied. "It's no more right for The Washington Post to send a black to Moscow than it is for Pravda to send a Jew as a correspondent to Washington. The Jew will always put the interests of Israel before those of the Soviet Union. And a black will put the interests of blacks before those of Americans." Through Soviet television or newspapers like Pravda, such stereotypes are hammered home almost daily and Soviets have a hard time breaking through them. Those who accepted me as an American somehow rejected the thought that I could be black. Even close friends had difficulty coping with my skin color. This struck me one Sunday while I was visiting Valery and Nina Soifer, two friends who lived on the outskirts of Moscow. We saw one another frequently and spoke of everything, from antisemitism to Raisa Gorbachev, always steering clear of the subject of race.

Once, however, when Nina left the room, Valery looked me in the eye and whispered, "You know Nina always cringes and chastises me when I bring up the fact that you are black. She says it shows that I am racist. But is that really true?"

Another time, after a lunch at the home of Gennady Krochik and his wife, Nina, both friends of mine, she broke the unspoken taboo. Having arrived at an important conclusion, she wanted to share it with me. "It's obvious that when we look at you and talk to you that you're a mixture, maybe a mulatto, someone with some Negro blood, but not much," she said. "That's what I have decided."

Communist party officials seemed to ignore my skin color altogether. Rather, they treated me as a member of the American press corps, and accorded me all of the courtesies -- and, to be sure, advantages -- that go along with working for the biggest newspaper in the U.S. capital. I often wondered why, and it was not until my stint in Moscow was coming to an end that I realized just how perplexed Soviet authorities were with the very idea of me.

The foreign ministry invited me on a trip it had arranged for journalists to Yalta. When the departure date came, my guide, a foreign ministry official I knew to be associated with the KGB, told me I would be the only one going. "So we will be going alone," he said.

Throughout the three-day trip, the official peppered me with questions: What does your father do for a living? What did you study in college? Who decides what articles you write? Aside from the chance to make me hostage to the official and his questions, the trip seemed pointless. We met at breakfast, lunch and dinner, each time bringing a new barrage of questions. Keeping my answers vague, I wondered what the official was getting at. It wasn't until we were on the plane home, both tired and letting our hair down, that he gave me a hint of his mission.

"What we can't figure out," he said, "is why they sent a black in a position like yours. It's a very important position." Coming to terms with Soviet racial attitudes has always been hard for African Americans. (In "Russia and the Negro," Howard University Professor Alison Blakely chronicles three centuries of relations between blacks and Russians, without addressing the question of racism.) An older generation of black Americans, disgruntled with the state of race relations in their own country, wanted to believe that there was a safe haven for them somewhere in the world. And, indeed, in Paul Robeson's day, ties between blacks and Russians were closer. Robeson, the extraordinary black polymath, athlete and entertainer, was so affable that he charmed Joseph Stalin and set a positive standard for relations between African Americans and Soviets that has lingered over the course of this century. In the 1950s, Felix Rosenthal, a Soviet journalist with Time's Moscow bureau, recently recalled: "The official propaganda was pro-internationalist, rah-rah about Africa and all that. People believed in it too."

The corner was turned in the late 1960s, when locals clashed in a series of bloody riots with Africans studying at Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University, founded to provide Third World students with higher education. Lily Golden, born of an interracial American couple and raised in the central Asian part of the Soviet Union, believes that Soviets have all but lost their idealism on the subject of race. A burly, brown-skinned researcher at Moscow's Africa Institute, she moonlights as a Dear Abby figure for blacks and their friends in the Soviet capital. "The other day, a pregnant woman called up hysterically asking whether her child, fathered by an African, would come out black. Another wanted to know if the black would wash off her boyfriend's skin."

In the Soviet Union of today, when tensions among all ethnic groups run high and ideals are in dire shortage, it is easy to lose all illusions about improving race relations. On one occasion, I was dining with a Russian friend in a Leningrad restaurant. As the evening wore on, and the bottle of vodka we were sharing began to dwindle, we broke into Russian folk songs. "Shut up," came a cry from across the room. "This is not the 1940s and you are no Paul Robeson." In early 1989, when my tour as a journalist in Moscow ended, I set out on a 5,000-mile journey, mostly by train, taking me through the rolling Ural mountains, muddy Siberian villages and the vast expanse of the northern wilderness, ending in Khara Kharoum, the ancient seat of Ghengis Khan in the Mongolian desert. The main purpose was to write a book, an oral history of the people I met in the Russian provinces. My hidden agenda was to discover the racial attitudes of people I met along the way. I was not without apprehension. Before I left, Newsweek had reported the brutal murder of an African in a Soviet city, and even as I waited in a Moscow train station on my day of departure, I was greeted with an omen: a young man from Mali was going to Magnitogorsk, a city in the Urals I intended to visit. His brother had been mysteriously killed there two days earlier. He was going to get the body.

Along the way, I interviewed other blacks, something I had done little of during my years in the Soviet capital. In

Ulyanovosk, Lenin's birthplace, I met a South African who had come to study in Simferopol, a city on the Black Sea. Asked about racism there, he gave a demoralizing litany, of being barred from local restaurants, beat up on the streets at night, called "less than a man" by strangers. Boarding a Chinese train in the city of Ulan-Ude, near the border with Mongolia, I met a man from Niger. Soon after I boarded, he knocked on the door of my cabin. "One by one the Chinese conductors have been coming to me," he said. " 'Now you have someone to talk to,' they say." Yet when I reflect on that year of travel, these are not the incidents I remember best. Nor, for that matter, are the jeering crowds in Novosibirsk, the policeman in Svirdlosk who asked if I lived in a zoo, the teasing teenagers in the Baltics. What I remember are the people who helped, who met me as a stranger, a traveler who had nothing but a backpack and the denim jacket on his back. But they went to great lengths to give me assistance, food for the journey; here a place to sleep, there a tip for an interesting interview.

They made a motley Traveler's Aid society: a Tatar grandmother who stuck her last 25 rubles in my coat pocket when she thought I wasn't looking; a group of teenagers in Novosibirsk who smuggled me into a midnight Easter feast in one of their homes; the late shift of a youth newspaper in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk, who filled me with apples, moonshine vodka and encouragement. Among such people, it was very rare that the subject of race came up. Out in the wilderness, where grown men work for pennies a day and eat nothing but potatoes for months, doting over gradations in skin color was a luxury they could not afford.

In the semi-closed city of Perm, a car mechanic named Yuri Petrov approached me in the streets and asked whether I wanted to meet his wife and baby daughter and share some soup. Petrov became my unofficial guide in that gray industrial city in the Urals. On my last night in Perm, he piled me, his extended family and a few friends into several rickety old trucks and drove out in the countryside. We stopped when we came to a clearing in a forest of birch trees, the long ones with white bark that blanket Russia. There we roasted some meat and chickens and made a salad of greens and tomatoes. (I still wonder how, in the midst of winter, he got such delicacies.) We drank a lot of Russian beer too.

As night fell, we got back into the truck and headed for the Perm station, where I would board a train for Svirdlovsk, my next stop. As we waited, with Petrov's wife and daughter milling nearby, we batted around personal matters: his fledgling mechanic's business, his alcoholic father-in-law, my mother in Tulsa.

Even as the train pulled up to the platform, I fully expected him to ask about black Americans. He never did. Instead, as our meeting drew to a close, he stepped towards me and, brushing the snow off my cap, gave me a verbal salute. "You have a long and difficult road ahead," he said. "I wish you a good journey. And when you get home and tell your mother about this, tell her that way off in the woods you met a bunch of Russians who gave you a square meal and a warm place to sit down. Don't tell her about our beat-up old cars, or tiny flat. Tell her we tried to be friendly."

GRAPHIC: ILLUSTRATION, BOB DAHM FOR TWP