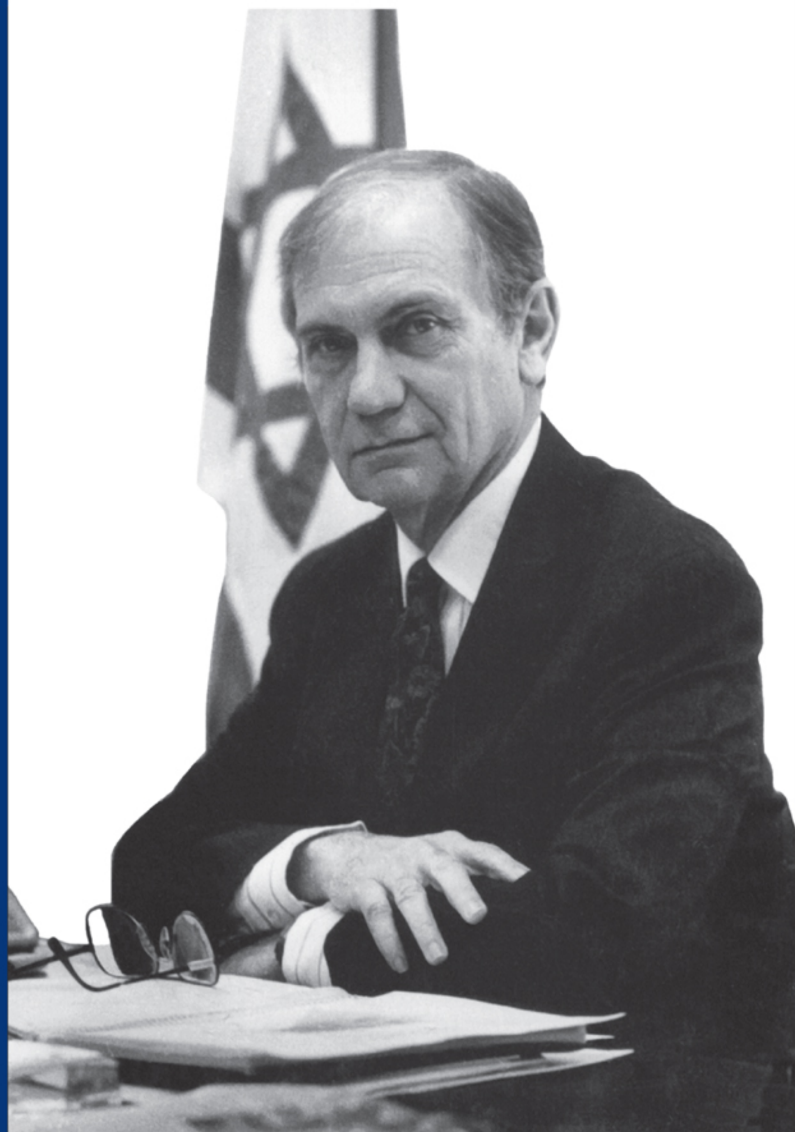
ARYEH LEVIN

MEMOIRS OF AN ISRAELI AMBASSADOR, 1988-92

ENVOY TO MOSCOW



ENVOY TO MOSCOW

Memoirs of an Israeli Ambassador
1988–92

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The Cummings Center for Russian and East European Studies
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Memoirs of an Israeli Ambassador, 1988–92

Aryeh Levin

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Memoirs of an Israeli Ambassador 1988–92

ARYEH LEVIN

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Typeset by Marty Bokel, Tel Aviv, Israel

To Aliza

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Acknowledgements

The idea of writing a book about my experiences in the Soviet Union and Russia was urged on me by many friends and well-wishers throughout the unique four years I spent there at the head of Israel's Mission. I never related to it seriously during my stay, as the pressures of work were far too great to indulge in keeping a detailed diary. Nor could I sustain the effort of methodic note-taking in meetings and conversations with the many interesting people and situations that I encountered.

Upon returning home from Moscow I soon resigned from the Foreign Ministry. I thought the forty-two years of service in government had earned me the right to devote a few years to other activities: among them, writing an account of the extraordinary events my companions and I had gone through in those tumultuous concluding years of the Soviet state and of the massive immigration to Israel.

I had thus to rely on my personal appointment books and letters home, which amounted to a description of the life and times that I lived through in Moscow. The rest came from the pages of a vivid memory still fresh with the images of those unforgettable days. The great upheaval in the life and times of both Israel and Russia have left deep impressions. I have written this book in the hope of sharing them with the public and with specialists who wish to gain insight from a participant, like myself. My book is a personal memoir, not an endeavour at historical or political analysis, which must be left to the scholars.

Professor Gabriel Gorodetsky, Head of the Cummings Center at Tel Aviv University, encouraged and helped me to bring this task to completion. I shall be forever in his debt. I wish to express my thanks and appreciation to Deena Leventer, who edited the text. A number of friends, among them Newton Frohlich and Dr Avraham Ben-Yaacov, read the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions. My family was there as always, optimistic and supportive to the end.

Aryeh Levin
Jerusalem, 1995

Foreword

One of the most spectacular features of the Communist collapse was the change that ensued in the Middle East. The huge weight and bulk of the Soviet Union was suddenly transferred from the negative to the positive scale of the strategic balance. No longer the Soviet Union as the spoiler, the supplier of arms to radical Arab countries and the instigator of hostility between Israel and its neighbours. There was now Russia as a partner of the peace process and an ally of the United States in the promotion of stability.

This change led to a wider opening of the gates, enabling a massive emigration of Soviet Jews, mainly to Israel. Opportunities for creative diplomacy were now available for the Israeli diplomats who had previously led an embattled existence in an atmosphere of tense hostility.

Aryeh Levin straddled the transition between the two eras. He used his enhanced fortune with good effect. He has a dramatic story to tell in this book and he tells it with style and passion.

Israel was fortunate in having one of its most talented emissaries in such a central post.

Abba Eban

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Preface

Of all my travels in the service of the Israeli government, the Russian interlude still seems to be the most extraordinary. There was a great deal of drama: I witnessed the demise of the communist state; I stood at the floodgates when a sudden wave of Jewish immigration rose, crested and subsided with a burst of tremendous energy. But above all, this was a very personal experience. I lived through all these events, not as an outsider, a foreigner shielded from the populace by the conventions of diplomatic practice, but rather as an individual deeply involved in the texture of life around him. The circumstances in which I first found myself in Moscow were quite unconventional. Lack of access to the upper echelons of the state was largely compensated by an easy rapport with the people around me. And as so often in one's life, many things just happened. Destiny, it seemed, had brought me to the very heartland of Russia at a crossroads in its complex history.

It was also fate that led me to learn a number of languages. In large measure they dictated the course of my life and career. I was born and raised in Tehran as a Farsi and Russian speaker. My father came from an observant family of Hasidic Jews in the Ukraine and longed to 'ascend to Jerusalem', though it took him many more years than he had planned. He had no knowledge of spoken Hebrew. To him it was the 'holy tongue', not to be used for vulgar speech but a language in which to study the Talmud and to pray. A fervent Zionist, he vowed to raise me in Palestine. Times were difficult, we could not travel and my father failed to fulfil his

pledge. To allay his feelings of guilt, he made me learn Hebrew. There was an assortment of teachers available in Tehran, all zealous but sadly underqualified. One of them was an old cantor from Vilnius, who would translate the text of the Torah, chapter by chapter, and assign me to repeat the translation at a second lesson during the week. My father felt satisfied that I was being educated in the language of the prophets and would summon me twice a year to check on my progress. He would inquire if I already knew Hebrew. I did not, but would weakly reply 'yes', inwardly trembling at the consequences. To verify my statement, my father would fetch a volume in Hebrew with silver-embossed letters on a light blue cover and command me to read and translate into Russian. The book was a condensation of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe,* written in a style far removed from the religious writing I had been studying. As I stammered, my body wet with perspiration, my father's rage surged, along with his parental voice. When we both approached the breaking point, Father warned that I would 'bleat like a sheep' when I arrived in Jerusalem and shame the family. At this point, the storm would subside, I would promise to pay greater attention to Hebrew and could count on an additional six months' grace. This association of pervasive fear with the Hebrew language did not prevent me from settling in Israel and integrating Hebrew into my system, although my children sometimes catch me counting in Farsi.

As we spoke Russian at home, my father never checked my proficiency in that tongue. He possessed a sizable Russian library which contained, needless to say, an unabridged version of *Robinson Crusoe*. There was also a large émigré library in Tehran, most of which I went through before I had reached the age of 13. The classics were my favourite reading. Their language became indelibly imprinted on my mind. The first time I ever stepped on Russian soil was in 1988, when I arrived for a brief six-week tour of duty. I heard myself attempting to revive my memory of Russian from past readings of Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev and Nikolai Gogol — hardly the medium of modern diplomacy. After a time, daily perusal of the Soviet press, attentive viewing of television and repeated ventures into Russian conversation brought my speech closer to the modern-day idiom.

Since the age of 30, I have reaped the benefits of my earlier encounters with languages. In army intelligence my duties required me to read a great amount of material in the languages I had learned in my early youth. When I joined Israel's foreign service I was posted to Paris, where I polished the French which I had learned in a private kindergarten and high school and which I had never forgotten. I was assigned as deputy chief of our diplomatic mission to pre-Khomeini Tehran because of my knowledge of the country and of its tongue. At the United Nations in New York, I returned to the American English I had learned at the Community School, an American secondary-school establishment in Tehran, which has left its mark on me until this very day.

The Six-Day War of 1967 was to be a turning point in my life. The war caught me in Kigali, Rwanda, at the head of our embassy there. I had poor communications with Jerusalem and heard of Israel's victories over a shortwave radio, a possession which placed me very much in demand among Rwandan ministers and my fellow diplomats. I heard of the severance of relations with the Soviet Union but was astonished when the local Soviet ambassador demonstratively ignored me at official functions and averted his eyes when we met on the only paved street in Kigali. It must have been difficult for him, as he did not know a single language except Russian and I was the only diplomat who could help him out at receptions. The other envoys in the small African city joked about the official, fierce expression he would affect when he saw me appear.

In Israel, we had become used to the quirks of Soviet international politics and to its propaganda — ever more strident — against us. The Soviet severance of relations with Israel was reminiscent of Khrushchev's shoe-banging at the UN. It was a typical manifestation of Soviet political culture. In light of the severe deterioration in Soviet-Israeli relations, Israel became deeply concerned about the fate of Jews in the Soviet Union, who, to an extent, had to bear the consequences of these international developments. Few people thought it would take the Russians over two decades to renew diplomatic relations, and I never imagined that I would be the one running up the flag in Moscow when they did.

My proficiency in Russian was only one of the reasons I found myself in Moscow. Beyond the professional considerations of my ministry, which found me suitable for the task, I always liked working in new and exceptional situations. Ethiopia, Rwanda, Iran and Russia stand out, from that point of view. I knew I would be exposed in Moscow to the elements of the Soviet system, *a priori* hostile and unwelcoming to an Israeli diplomat; none of us had any inkling of how matters would turn out, but my curiosity prevailed, and I assented to my minister's bidding. An assignment to the Soviet Union was considered a challenge. It was also very important politically. For all these reasons, I considered a first Moscow trip, late in 1988, an opportunity not to be missed. This was a mission for which, subconsciously, I had been preparing myself. After my first weeks there, I became increasingly hesitant about remaining in Moscow as I realized our goals would take much longer to attain than I had originally thought. In the end, I stayed four years and have never regretted it.

I

Into the Breach

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1 · *Preparations*

I had never enjoyed as much popularity as when I returned from my first trip to Moscow at the end of December 1988. I was inundated with phone calls and requests for interviews, appointments and lectures. Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had sent me out on an exploratory assignment to the Soviet capital to see if I could hold out as head of our temporary consular mission.

The assignment was unusual; after all, we had not had a mission in Moscow for well over 20 years and relations with the Soviet Union were still cool. The first group of consular workers we had sent out was headed by a junior official. They reported difficult living conditions and official ostracism. Our ministry concluded that a diplomat of ambassadorial rank could perhaps improve the mission's stature, and I was asked to head the group in Moscow for six weeks. My presence would probably not have had the desired impact had it not been for a lucky and entirely unforeseen incident: the hijacking of a Soviet airplane to Israel and its prompt return made world headlines and extricated the Israeli mission from the isolation to which it had been relegated by the Russians. The Israeli public, used to Soviet churlishness, was elated at the unexpected 'breakthrough'. This optimism was not fully justified, but even so, I found myself very much in the news.

I was frankly relieved to be back behind my desk as head of political research. This post afforded great insight into our external affairs. It was far more enjoyable than being an unofficial Israeli representative in Moscow, under constant scrutiny by the KGB. Still, I had difficulty in getting back to my department, prominent

and thriving though it was. I had to make up for the six weeks I had spent away from my job. I found myself constantly reliving the extraordinary events that had made that initial sojourn so memorable in my own mind, as well as in the perception of numerous friends and colleagues. In the eyes of the Israeli public, thirsty for news about Russia and its Jews, the unexpected nature of the events made them even more remarkable.

It had taken the Soviet government almost a year to agree to our demands for a reciprocal presence in the respective capitals. They had requested permission in 1986 to post a group of consular officials in residence at the Finnish Embassy in Tel Aviv. The Finns had been looking after Soviet interests ever since the break of diplomatic relations in 1967. We asked for a *quid pro quo*, but the Soviets demurred. They used all the tricks of the trade: they broke off the negotiations, toughened and relaxed their positions. At one point we suggested setting up consulates-general, which would have the virtual authority and privileges of embassies, but the Russians turned us down flat. Finally, they did allow us to establish a presence symmetrical to theirs in Israel and to maintain a group of 'consular workers' at the Netherlands Embassy in Moscow. The Dutch had been looking out for Israeli interests since the Six-Day War.

The Russians were making great efforts to convince us that their only interest in Israel was to oversee the real estate of the Imperial Russian family and the Orthodox Church, which they considered 'Soviet property' in the Holy Land. Since the 1967 War, most, but not all of this, was being administered by the Israeli Custodian for Absentee Property. They were indeed interested in laying hands on property they considered their own, but this was hardly the reason for sending a consular mission to Israel. It may have been a pretext for the Politburo's sudden change of policy in this regard. The professionals in the Foreign Ministry, the KGB and the research institutes, all with a great deal of influence over the Soviet decision makers, had a different argument. They were beginning to realize that the Soviet Union was losing out in the peace process unfolding in the Middle East. The Soviets wanted to force the participants into a peace conference, with the USSR present as a referee alongside the United States. In the Soviet view, the two

superpowers, each protective of its clients' interests, would help steer the course of the negotiations. Israel was convinced this approach would subject the peace conference to superpower dictates, and rejected the Soviet scheme.

As the breezes of perestroika began blowing in earnest in the second half of the 1980s, the need for a reappraisal of the USSR's strategy *vis-à-vis* Israel became more apparent. The Soviet government, due to its lengthy absence from the political scene in Israel, was rather ignorant of internal developments and political life. Their intelligence inside the country was spotty, and they had difficulty making realistic assessments. The Soviets did maintain unofficial contacts, both with individual politicians and with communists and other fellow-travellers. In secret meetings with Israeli officials such as Peres's assistant Nimrod Novik, Soviet diplomats would often direct the conversation to the political scene in Israel, revealing their na veté about its complexities. Even knowledge of Hebrew, a key to studying the political and social life in Israel, was lagging behind intelligence needs. This was hardly satisfactory for a great power with ambitions in the area. In time, as the signs of reform became more concrete, the Soviet establishment, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, decided to cautiously begin reshaping policy.

The Israeli government and public opinion were responsive to the first signs of Soviet interest in contacts. Israel was eager to establish a presence in the USSR, above all to assist Soviet Jews in any way possible and facilitate their immigration to Israel. We also wanted to work toward the eventual re-establishment of diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, Israel had to abide by the conventions of Soviet diplomacy and play at their game of dissimulation and secrecy. The Soviet government declared its interest in establishing a small team of officials in Tel Aviv to help Soviet citizens residing in Israel and to maintain Soviet property. Israel announced it wished to inspect its embassy building and observe the issuing of visas to Israel by Dutch consular officials.

The Soviets were stubborn in refusing to consider Israeli requests for reciprocity. Their leadership feared they would lose international prestige if they allowed Israeli diplomats into their country. An Israeli presence in their capital, they argued, might

harm ties with the Arab states. The initial negotiations on allowing a Soviet consular group into Israel opened in Helsinki in summer of 1986. Israel demanded the release of all prisoners of Zion, free emigration for the 11,000 refuseniks and the lifting of restrictions on Jewish education. The Russians immediately halted the meeting. They then haggled and procrastinated for many months until they finally, begrudgingly, agreed to Israel's terms. Israel was permitted to send a consular group to Moscow. The Soviet team in Tel Aviv anticipated the Israelis by something like a year. The Israeli group arrived in the Soviet capital at the end of July 1988.

This whole move had been discussed and planned by Israel's Foreign Ministry well ahead of time. Israel had been waiting for just such an opportunity. The meetings between Israeli and Soviet leaders had been infrequent. Yitzhak Shamir met Gromyko in 1981 and again in 1984. As prime minister, he met Shevardnadze in 1988; Shimon Peres, in his capacity as minister of foreign affairs met Shevardnadze in 1987 and then again in 1988. There were sporadic lower-level meetings as well. The questions of Jewish education, freedom for prisoners of Zion and emigration of refuseniks were always raised by the Israeli side, as was the subject of normalization of diplomatic relations. The habitual Soviet response was that relations would be resumed when the peace process was well under way and when Israel retreated from the occupied territories and recognized the Palestine Liberation Organization. With the beginning of Gorbachev's perestroika, hopes ran high for a different approach. The Politburo, however, had the decisive voice and was chary of giving the impression — to the Arabs and the Soviet public alike — that the Soviet government was giving in. Voices calling for a change of attitude toward Israel could already be heard in the Soviet establishment, and there was a certain softening in the tone at the end of the 1980s. Nonetheless, the higher echelons of power in the USSR attempted at all times to 'maintain the dignity of a great power', which slowed down progress on relations with Israel. The Helsinki meeting in 1986 and its follow-up later in 1987 signalled a change in the pace.

The Israeli government never removed the subject of the Soviet Union from the agenda. The Russians were a most important element in the map of the Middle East and had been active there

since the establishment of Israel. The Israeli cabinet's intelligence briefings often related to the subject of the USSR's presence and activity in the area. The issue of Soviet policy was broached on many occasions in the discussions that I participated in as head of political research. Gorbachev's ascent to power and the changes in the international climate made the USSR an object of great curiosity and closer scrutiny. Israelis had a very special interest in Russia because of their emotional and cultural connections.

One briefing with Foreign Minister Peres stands out in my mind because of its somewhat unusual character. Peres demanded that we role play in order to prepare him for a meeting with his Soviet counterpart, Shevardnadze, at the General Assembly session which was to take place in autumn 1987. Peres was to play 'our' part, while we interpreted Shevardnadze's. But our foreign minister did not have the patience required for such a rehearsal. He snapped at us and interfered with our acting, claiming we did not reflect the Soviet minister's thinking or behaviour. Roles got mixed in the process and so we did not get very far that day, but we remained intrigued as to how things would work out at the actual meeting.

When he returned, Peres did not call us in to say what had transpired during his talks with Shevardnadze, but he did hand out the minutes of his meeting, albeit under seven seals of secrecy and only to a select few in his bureau. The transcript, by the way, was not dissimilar to the rehearsal, barring the fact that the parties did not for a minute forget who they were. Shevardnadze turned out to be a little more positive that we expected. He showed an inclination to pursue a political dialogue and expressed readiness to look into our requests on freeing Jews from detention and instituting direct flights for immigrants. None of these points were actually concluded until much later. At the same time, the Soviet minister complained about Israel's vociferous propaganda against the Soviet Union on the subject of Jewish emigration and its cooperation with the US in the Star Wars programme. Still, Shevardnadze was certainly an improvement over his predecessor, the dour and dogmatic Gromyko.

When the Israeli team finally arrived in Moscow, we started getting back reports of material hardships and of the inaccessibility of government agencies to our diplomats. The Moscow Ministry of

Foreign Affairs housed our officials at the Ukraina Hotel, a once attractive place of residence for officials of the Soviet bloc. It was built in the early 1950s, with a tall spire and huge stone urns on the roof, a flight of Stalin's personal architectural fancy. I was soon to discover at first-hand the lifestyle imposed on its lodgers.

At the Netherlands Embassy, where some of us were to work, three members of our delegation (those helping the Dutch with consular work) shared a room with four Russian secretaries, experienced and friendly consular workers who made us feel at home in the cramped space. It was hardly comfortable, but we were thankful, as the Dutch themselves were working out of a badly constrained chancellery.

Our diplomats were slowly getting used to their tasks and carrying them out with patience and good humour, mindful of the importance of the assignment. They were not fazed by the many recurrences of harassment, clearly committed on orders from above: slashing our car tyres, open and aggressive surveillance, and hovering when mission members were visiting acquaintances. We were denied contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The tactic was to assign our official meetings, those deemed absolutely necessary, to a functionary of the consular department of the Foreign Ministry. This official essentially acted as a post-office box for our messages. We were told to maintain all our contacts only through the good offices of the Royal Netherlands Embassy. We were not allowed to visit, or entertain the thought of using the Israel Embassy building, still under lease by us. The Soviet Foreign Ministry would not even allow the flag of the Netherlands to fly on that building, in spite of the fact that the Netherlands Embassy was officially representing Israel. When once the Dutch had the temerity to run up their flag at Israel's former embassy, they were immediately called on the carpet. Later applications in that regard were rather impolitely turned down — this notwithstanding the fact that Israel had contributed over two million dollars' rent to the Soviet treasury over the 20 years of its absence from Moscow. The Russians made it quite plain that the Israeli mission was not wanted in the capital, but since we had somehow managed to find our way in, they intended to keep us out of sight.

On balance, the experiment was considered positive from our

point of view. The Jewish population of the USSR had become aware of our presence in their midst and were not strongly hindered in making contacts. The Israeli government's inclination was to maintain and widen the scope of the mission.

Early in October the time had come to rotate our team and it was thought that higher visibility should be given to the head of mission. The foreign minister reconsidered his earlier reservations about sending his ministry's head of intelligence to the Russian capital, for fear of a protest, and I was asked to go to Moscow. As I was eager to continue my duties as head of political research until we knew where we were heading in Moscow, I was assured my sortie would be over in six weeks. In the meantime, I was to leave for the Soviet capital to get my bearings.

Although I had been following the Soviet scene for years, I had never dreamed that my first trip to the Soviet Union would be at the head of my country's mission. When I was informed of the decision and had given my consent, I went home feeling slightly giddy and a little worried about the days ahead. The Soviet Union in October 1988 was not the country it is today. I could not imagine how the Soviets would behave toward me and my colleagues, and what we could do to establish better working relations with them.

A year earlier I had received in my office at the ministry a man of some notoriety: Victor Lewis, the Soviet journalist who was purported to have special contacts with the KGB and the Soviet leadership. He was one of the most active sources of extraordinary news leaks to the West and had carved himself a special niche in the grey area of unofficial East-West relations. His visit to Israel was unusual but had no special significance. We had a long conversation in Russian about the Middle East and the Soviet Union as well as about the future of the Russian presence in Afghanistan. As he was leaving my office, he turned around and said: 'You know, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if sometime very soon I will see you as your country's ambassador in Moscow.' I laughed. The thought of Israel renewing its ties with the USSR was unrealistic enough at the time, to say nothing of the possibility of my own appointment. I put the thought quite out of my mind. The memory of those prophetic words came back to me as I was on my way home to announce the news to my family.

I wanted to obtain as much practical information as possible before I flew out to Russia. The reports we were receiving from our mission in Moscow were skimpy. Communication problems and the heavy workload our officials had to bear left little time for observation and less for writing reports. I called on a number of specialists and former Soviet citizens for consultations. Some were well-known and well-connected in the Soviet Union before their emigration to Israel. They described what they remembered of life in Moscow and compiled long, outdated lists of telephone numbers and addresses. It was evident I would have to be very much on my own and I began preparing myself for the worst.

My wife and children were not particularly pleased about my departure to the USSR, but they threw a big farewell party and all made light of the six weeks that awaited me. On the weekend before my departure, some friends and I drove out to the Diefenbaker forest on the road to Jerusalem for a picnic and talked about my assignment. Most of us were experienced diplomats, but not one of us knew anything about daily life in the Soviet Union. Neither did we understand what perestroika really meant or where it was heading.

The following week I took the KLM flight to the Hague, where our embassy was running the Moscow mission with the help of the Netherlands government. I saw a number of officials at the Dutch Foreign Ministry and had a briefing with our staff, one of whom, Danny Megiddo, had just returned from a stint in Moscow.

One tends to forget how little we knew at that time about the Soviet Union, Gorbachev and his policy of perestroika. The many accounts I heard at the Hague, though intelligent and well-informed, were somewhat at variance with the hard truth I discovered for myself in the course of my first six weeks in Moscow. They simply did not reflect the confusion, the cross-currents inside the Soviet establishment, and the growing instability and loss of confidence that I was to witness. The predominant theme which emerged in my talks at the Hague was the unpredictability of the Soviet Union and the inscrutability of its leading personalities, including Mikhail Gorbachev. It goes without saying that I was also thoroughly briefed on the efficiency of the KGB and alerted to the necessary precautions I had to take to

be on my guard. The security people did not bolster my self-confidence.

The other challenge I knew I would face was Russian weather. Images of vast steppes under layers of deep snow in sub-zero temperatures led me on a vast shopping spree for woolen underwear, fur hats and other paraphernalia which I thought was essential. Indeed, all this equipment proved invaluable since Moscow had run out of everything. And so, on 4 November 1988, with bags laden with clothes and food, I took off on the flight to Moscow.

At the stopover in Warsaw we were asked not to leave the plane. My heart beat faster when I saw Polish soldiers boarding the plane. Inspection? I was relieved to discover they had only come to collect their ration of western cigarettes, nonchalantly handed out by the steward. That small incident put politics into its proper perspective and made my journey into the Soviet sphere less awesome.

Finally, we landed at the snow-covered Sheremetyevo airport. It was dimly lit and uninviting. The KGB border guard examined my diplomatic passport with great thoroughness. The suspicious-looking document was turned over and over. After what seemed an hour, the soldier's telephone rang and a lengthy conversation ensued about 'him' and 'his' with repeated stares and comparisons to the passport photo. 'Israel' and 'Israeli' were words that went back and forth many times. Obviously, a very dangerous individual had landed. Just when I was planning to camp there overnight, the soldier slapped my documents down and curtly informed me I could go. I went to collect my luggage in the mound of suitcases and cartons of every description piled high on the conveyor marked KLM HAGUE, only to discover that my suitcases were being fed into the conveyor marked JAL TOKYO. A member of our mission whisked me out into the daylight and put me into our official car, bearing Dutch license plates. The sound of Russian broadcast over the public address system still rang in my ears as we started out of the airport on the road to Moscow.

The sights were all new to me, but very much what I had imagined. Several kilometres out there was a giant 'dragon's tooth', an iron tank obstacle symbolizing the limits of the German advance on Moscow in the Second World War. I remembered the days of my

childhood in Tehran, when my father, back from work late in the evening, his cigarette held in his tobacco-stained fingers, would look into my 'situation room'. I had a large-scale map pinned on the wall, where I would daily mark the German advance with a black ribbon. Later, a red ribbon was used to pinpoint the Russian counter-attacks. My father was worried about the progress of the war — for personal reasons, among others. There had been no news at all about his family in the Ukraine since the outbreak of hostilities. The only message we had was a single letter from Uncle Lev, who was a colonel in the tank corps. He was fighting in the Moscow region and was apparently killed defending the city, as we never heard from him again. The rest of the family disappeared as well. They had all been evacuated from the Ukraine into the Russian hinterland at the outset, but the letters my father had been receiving before the German invasion stopped coming altogether. In all my years in Russia, I could not find any trace of his family.

The mission's car finally entered the city and drove down Gorky Street, approaching Manezh Square. The store windows and shelves appeared to be empty. Yet there were crowds milling about on the sidewalks. People looked sullen and purposeful, going about in endless processions, very much like Van Gogh's depiction of convicts exercising in the prison yard. I found this first impression of Moscow striking. As we drove on, my companion busily explained the rules and regulations of traffic: no left turns except at points marked overhead, and long detours in search of exits. Pedestrians were taught not to infringe on the prerogatives of vehicles. A truck drove by, raining a mixture of sand, pebbles and salt to de-ice the road. A small rock hit the windshield, luckily just a scratch. Broken glass would have meant putting the car in a garage for over a week and ordering a spare from Finland.

Finally, we made it to the Ukraina, a hotel characterized by worn Victorian splendour. A large red plaque in the lobby announced the patrons' order of precedence: heroes of the Soviet Union had access to rooms without prior notification; invalids of the Great Patriotic War could get a room after three days' notice. Ordinary people, depending on their institutional connections, had to make alternative arrangements. We faced the hotel reception's bureaucrats. They wanted to know if we had applied to the Tall

Buildings Administration for permission to reside at the hotel. It appeared there was a separate bureau that ran tall buildings (up to 20 floors) in the city, of which the hotel was one. Of course, we had forgotten to ask their permission beforehand. But for two cartons of Marlborough cigarettes we were given leave to produce such a permit the next day. In the meantime, I could use the room that had been illicitly reserved for me. I was thoroughly exhausted and overwhelmed with first impressions of an incomprehensible Soviet Union.

2 · *Reconnaissance to Confrontation*

The long trajectory in space and time, from modern-day Hague to the faded glory of the Soviet capital, made for an exciting but exhausting journey. I fell into a deep and sound sleep that first night at the Ukraina Hotel. However, the realization that I was actually in bed under a Soviet roof awakened me in the middle of the night. I approached the window and observed the dimly lit streets below. Across, I could see the white marble building of the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic (also known as the White House), scene of many exciting and unusual events yet to come. It was slumbering under its large golden clock tower. The Moscow River had frozen over with thin ice. There were trucks on the bridge that connected the two banks and fed the wide avenue beyond. Workers in heavy clothing were unloading and fixing multicoloured flags to the railings in preparation for the November festivities marking the 71st anniversary of the October Revolution. It was snowing, not the big flakes I always thought blanketed the steppes, but a thin powder, which kept falling slowly for days on end, until it built up to a uniform, thick cover of crisp, crunchy snow.

My mind went back to a meeting I had attended in autumn 1984 between the then Foreign Ministers Yitzhak Shamir and Andrei Gromyko. Bibi Netanyahu had just been appointed our ambassador to the UN. He was the Likud Party's great hope and already, in the minds of some, the heir apparent to Shamir, who

headed the party. I was deputy ambassador to the UN. A meeting with the Soviets had been organized at our request. Shamir, like other ministers of foreign affairs of Israel, was always eager to meet with his Soviet counterpart. The results of these interviews were virtually predetermined by the rigid Soviet Middle East policy and close alliance with the Arabs. Still, our ministers insisted on having the Russians hear them out.

We arrived at the appointed hour at the Soviet UN Representation in New York and were received at the door by a short young lieutenant in uniform. He led us to a reception room and after a while a small group of people walked in. I recognized Anatoly Dobrynin and Oleg Troyanovsky, Soviet ambassadors to the US and the UN, respectively. An assistant told us Andrei Gromyko was in another meeting and would be joining us soon. We sat down in two rows, facing each other in heavy silence, broken only by words whispered by members of both parties among themselves. Tea arrived and was consumed, and Gromyko was still absent. I thought we had better get some conversation going. As New York was going through a beautiful Indian summer, I asked Dobrynin when snow fell in Russia. I hoped that Dobrynin, the great and experienced diplomat that he was, would take up the cue. 'Snow usually starts falling toward the end of October', he said, but in 1941, when the Germans were in the full swing of their attack against his country, Dobrynin added, it unexpectedly fell in September, bogging down the German advance and making life much more difficult for the Germans than they had expected. Dobrynin went on from there, speaking in fluent English, and needing no encouragement to continue the story until Gromyko finally walked in.

When I arrived in Moscow in early November snow had already covered much of the ground. I was concerned how things would turn out for my mission and for our ambition to get the Russians moving away from the ironclad position they had been maintaining toward us. Would perestroika and *détente* affect the Soviets' behaviour? There were many attempts to get them to change their sullen attitude. Western governments and considerable public activity had not made a dent; nor had efforts of influential individuals to approach Gorbachev and other members

of the Politburo. However, I refused to give up hope. My main concern was to establish an operational base from which we could widen our presence in the Soviet Union and achieve our goals. With no friends or influence in the top echelons of power, or even access to government, we had to build our contacts from the ground up. I hoped I would be able to penetrate the barriers around me. That first night in Moscow, I had no idea how to proceed.

I woke up early, to a snowy morning. At the bank in the hotel lobby, I was advised that the 500 dollars I wanted to change was a lot of money, and that I would not be needing it. In the street, my first encounter with *sama zhizn'* (real life) was highly instructive. I stood in line for milk and was told, impatiently, to go pay for it first. Then I had to stand in line again to collect the purchase. Triumphantly, I emerged from the store and came into our rooms to discover the milk had turned. We gathered to breakfast on some of the food brought from the Hague and from Vienna, our convenient havens from the inadequacies of Moscow.

Miron Gordon, who had preceded me as temporary head of mission, had been the first trail-blazer into Soviet territory when the mission arrived. I was now relieving him and we sat down to talk about the situation in Moscow and our relations with the Soviet government officials, which were practically non-existent. Miron was born and raised in the USSR and had studied Soviet affairs at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Because of his Russian inflection, as well as his considerable girth and scraggly beard, many people mistook him for a Russian Orthodox priest — a fact which had led to many amusing incidents. On one occasion, when Miron was at the Intourist office, a female receptionist whispered into the phone that the priest had arrived for his appointment and was impatient to be received. Over the next few years, Miron came to Moscow on different occasions to help us out. Being very knowledgeable about life there and a specialist on Russian balladeers, he was always in contact with a segment of the population that others among us missed, and was popular among artists, singers and people of that genre. It was always a great pleasure to have him aboard and see him behind his desk, into the small hours of the morning, struggling with the Russian phone

system or trying to answer the hundreds of letters that mercilessly landed on top of our tables every day. After a time, Miron was appointed ambassador to Poland, a position well earned. He subsequently ran the Russian desk at the ministry in Jerusalem.

Miron showed me the office in the hotel suite I was to inherit from him and the meagre archive he had put together, which was purposely open to possible scrutiny by the KGB during our absences. He briefed me on his activities and contacts in the three months he had spent in Moscow. The Soviet Foreign Ministry was unavailable and non-committal. The foreign diplomats, however, were curious, as were the journalists of the international press. Most read into our mission's presence a sign of changing times.

After a brief conversation, Miron and I rode out to the Royal Netherlands Embassy, which was giving us diplomatic cover and providing the framework for our activity. The sight that greeted me on my arrival at the embassy was that of an immense Dutch flag flying over a crowd of people standing in the snow, waiting for their turn at the consular offices. The militiaman at the gate sternly asked for my papers, and having examined them to his satisfaction, waved me in. We walked up the steps into the office, brushing against people standing in line and came into a room where four Russian women and three Israelis were handling documents and talking with the applicants through a small window. The Israelis in the room were members of our mission. They were not allowed by the Soviets to issue visas to Israel. This work was done by the Dutch consuls, who stamped and signed the documents. In contrast to procedures for all other countries, this was merely an intermediary step in the process eventually leading to exit from the Soviet Union.

Ambassador Petrus Buwalda and his staff were ideal hosts, trying to respond to all our needs, encouraging and helping us to the best of their ability. The Dutch had been acting on our behalf for many years, tending to the requirements of the Jewish exodus, in good times as well as bad. They eventually developed close contacts with the Jewish refuseniks. The embassy's Jewish contacts were a major source of information about life in the USSR, a point not lost on the European diplomats in general, as contacts with the Soviet population were sparse. The effort on behalf of Jewish

emigration and interests was a considerable political commitment for the Dutch government. It also appeared to be the mainstay of their diplomatic work in the Soviet Union in those years. The goal of my mission was to take over this activity and develop it into a full-fledged Israeli undertaking. With any other government we might have had a good share of tension and friction. These were reduced to a minimum with the Dutch — testifying to their indulgence more than ours. We were driven by our Mediterranean temperaments and our impatience to forge ahead in an area which constituted one of the main pillars of our state, Jewish immigration.

After years of pressure and negotiations, the USSR finally found it in its own interests to make certain concessions in the procedures to be followed by the emigrants. Israel was providing *vizovs* from relatives in Israel to families in the USSR. These were invitations either for visits or for permanent residence, mostly the latter, duly stamped and verified by a notary public. The forms, officially, were provided by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but in actual fact they came from Lishkat Hakesher, the Liaison Bureau, a special office in Tel Aviv dealing with questions pertaining to Soviet emigration. The Lishka was established in 1953 to deal with problems of Jews inside the eastern bloc countries. Until the collapse of the Soviet Union, its operations were covert and it was known by the code name 'Nativ'.

Vizovs were sent by mail to the Soviet Union. To my unending surprise over the years I spent in the Soviet Union, these letters regularly reached their destinations. There were few cases of sabotage, mostly perpetrated by local people, motivated by anti-Semitism or, at later stages, envy at the supposed ease with which Jews could leave the Soviet Union. The recipients of *vizovs* then applied to the local OVIR — the visa and registration department run by the Soviet Ministry of the Interior. The regulations said the papers should take two months to be processed but in fact they took a lot longer. In the general relaxation engendered by perestroika, the waiting period was reduced. In the meantime OVIR checked on the applicants to see if there were any objections to their departure. These were usually based on a tacit quota system, which eased up gradually as time went on. The other filtering system widely used by the authorities was security, often

a euphemism for other considerations such as suspected political or Zionist activity. Obstacles were put in the way of anyone who was even remotely connected with the defence establishment in either industry, research or administration. Objections to granting an exit permit could be and were numerous. An application for emigration could bring dismissal from employment and systematic harassment. In late 1988 this type of brutality had been curbed but had not disappeared altogether.

After OVIR ascertained, with the KGB's help, that the applicant was quite harmless, he would be issued a so-called triptych. This was a document consisting of OVIR permission to begin the process: the person in question would have to go to the Netherlands Consulate to get his Israeli visa and then purchase his airplane ticket. Jews were required to prove that Israel was ready to allow them in. Since there were no direct flights to Israel, the tickets would be made out to Austria or Italy, which meant standing in line for visas to one of those countries as well. This would allow OVIR to grant an exit visa, for which the applicant had to pay a tax, usually unfeasible for the average Soviet citizen to raise, and provided by the government of Israel through the Dutch Consulate. Upon issuing the exit visa, the authorities automatically annulled the emigrant's Soviet citizenship, rendering him stateless. The Jews had to pay for this 'service'. Those who emigrated to Israel received Israeli citizenship upon arrival. However, since the large majority of about ten to one usually went to Austria or Italy and were processed there for onward travel to the US, they were left high and dry, without an international status that could protect them in case of need. These excesses were maintained by the Soviet government until late into the 1980s. They were slowly changed as a result of external pressures and of developments inside the Soviet Union, where appeals for human rights were gradually gaining recognition.

This process was not only a prolonged test of patience and tenacity for those who became entangled in it. It was also a reflection of the arbitrariness of the Soviet regime. In our many efforts to modify and change this unnecessary and humiliating bureaucratic procedure we always came up against the basic inhumanity of the communist regime. For over 70 years the Soviet

system had subjected the inhabitants of the Soviet Union to hardship and degradation, sapping their strength and self-confidence. In the case of the Jews, there were doses of anti-Semitism accompanying other improprieties. Whereas the regulations governing the exit of emigrants were more or less uniform, only Jewish citizens had to pay a tax for an exit visa and no other emigrants had their citizenship revoked.

The workload generated for the Dutch Consulate by these convoluted requirements of the Soviet administration was heavy. Over the years from 1967, the Royal Netherlands government had borne this burden. Hundreds of thousands of Jews left the Soviet Union through the doors of its embassy in Moscow. We covered the costs involved, the salaries of the personnel and the expenses incurred: exit permits, material help where required when people were discharged from work, air tickets and other ancillary outlays of money. However, since we were not on the spot, we had no control over the actual issuance of visas, and had to leave it to our friends the Dutch to take the proper decisions in the framework of Israeli laws and regulations.

With our arrival in Moscow an increasing number of technical tasks were taken over by three members of our mission. The other three were occupied with diplomatic aspects of our assignment and security. All the official paperwork was done by the Dutch consuls and their Russian assistants. The end result of the effort involved in this emigration process was the exit of Soviet Jews primarily to the West and not to Israel, as we had dreamed for decades. Yet the growing number of emigrants was an encouraging sign in itself. We were hopeful that the day would come when Jews would change direction and come to Israel. The main reason for the *neshira* or 'drop out' of immigrants from their 'rightful path' to Israel was considered to be the ease with which Jews could obtain the status of political refugee, which greatly facilitated their entry into the US. This situation was to change toward the end of September 1989, but in November 1988, when I first arrived, the problems still looked formidable.

The Israeli government was motivated, at this point, by a desire to increase the *aliyah* ('ascent' to Israel) of Jews from the Soviet Union. The number of emigrants was still low and *neshira* did not

seem to be a major problem. Toward the end of 1988 and the beginning of 1989, attention to it increased as restrictions were gradually relaxed and the number of emigrants began mounting. The transit stations for Jewish emigrants in Italy and Austria began to overflow. The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and other Jewish organizations were handling their end of processing the would-be refugees, but US officials could not keep pace.

Beyond the work done at the Netherlands Embassy, members of the mission dealing with emigration spent their time meeting Jews — prospective emigrants, who would be instructed on applications procedures. With time, word got out that there was an Israeli mission in Moscow. Contacts began developing with a growing number of Jewish communities over the vast map of the Soviet Union. The difficulty in maintaining such contacts was in the absence of feasible points of congregation beyond the Dutch Consulate in Moscow.

Gradually, members of the mission began fanning out, visiting other areas and setting up lines of communication. The telephones at the Ukraina Hotel rang constantly, mainly late at night. The usual question was why the *vizov* had not arrived. The reason was usually the inaccuracy of addresses or names, or the tremendous backlog in the Lishka office in Tel Aviv.

Toward the end of 1991 over a million of these *vizov*s were floating about, giving us an excellent assessment of the number of potential emigrants and their state in the exit pipeline. I had the impression, however, that the Lishka at times preserved the backlog, hoping for an improvement in the situation of *aliyah* to Israel and the opening up of direct flights — something that appeared rather remote at the time. Everywhere I went, I received complaints about delays. The Lishka people explained they lacked manpower and that there were too many *vizov*s for the processing to be handled more efficiently. On special occasions, when I thought it necessary for humanitarian reasons, I would make a special request and the Lishka would deliver the *vizov* in record time. I never asked for special privileges for people who were not going to Israel.

My initial discussions with the Dutch Embassy officials did not go beyond preliminaries. Our main difficulties at the time were

logistics, an almost total lack of communication with Israel, the inadequacy of housing and absence of offices. The Dutch could not offer any help, tied up as they were with problems of their own and dependent as all foreign missions on the goodwill of the Soviet government. The official arm of the Soviets was the totally inefficient and frustrating UPDK, the Directorate for Servicing the Diplomatic Corps, affiliated with the Foreign Ministry. This was an organization whose task, to provide housing and other facilities, was carried out only in accordance with official policy. The Soviet government was highly uncooperative with Israel on the question of our mission's presence in their capital, and we had to make do with bare necessities. The Dutch did have a telephone line that connected them with the outside world and we were allowed to use it, sparingly, and at assigned times. We used the phone to get to our embassy in Vienna, which acted as a forward post and logistics centre for our mission. We had no expectations of being allowed to use our old embassy building on Bolshaia Ordynka Street.

The line of Jews standing outside in the snow, waiting for their exit papers, left an indelible impression. I recalled the very large demonstrations I had participated in and observed in New York and other cities for the freedom to emigrate. I believe they contributed a great deal to the relaxation of Soviet policies. I wondered, as many of us did, if the small group of Jews going to the US on Israeli visas was all we would be able to show for the huge effort that had been invested. From all we knew, things were about to change, but the direction and speed of these developments were unclear.

After my first visit to the Dutch Embassy, Miron took me on a tour of Moscow, showing me the two most exciting spots — the Kremlin and Red Square — and the special hard currency stores where we could buy food and other necessities not available to ordinary Soviet citizens. We had no staff or help at that point and had to do everything for ourselves, including cooking meals. The large suite I had at my disposal at the Hotel Ukraina had no cooking facilities. I prepared my own meals on a small electric hot plate from the provisions we bought at the dollar stores. Some of us were better cooks than others. In the evenings, when we had time, we would make the rounds, exchanging the tidbits we had

accumulated. There were few restaurants into which we dared venture, although there were some among us brave enough to try the *pelmeny* (dumpling) parlours — reminiscent of Fellini films — with corpulent Russian women, decked out in soiled aprons, fishing *pelmeny* out of boiling soup with large ladles. One of the most important quests in this city of ten million inhabitants was for decent places to eat. In this regard, diplomats, journalists and other foreigners cooperated fully, exchanging addresses and culinary critiques. Gradually, the situation improved, our restaurant intelligence expanded the number of eateries on our lists, and we began suffering less from the inadequacies of home cooking.

A long weekend began on the eve of celebrations commemorating the October Revolution. Long lines of people with flags, balloons, paper flowers, large banners and streamers trudged through the sleet toward Red Square to rehearse their roles in the upcoming parade. Television programmes were festive, in heavy Soviet fashion: classical music and theatre, and marathon speeches. There was also a lot of unexpected discussion on topical questions, including pornography and Afghanistan. In interviews, so-called *afgantsy* (soldiers who had fought in that country) spoke their minds on the pain, the drudgery, the cruelty of the unnecessary war and on the need to terminate it. I thought of how the 1970s had seen most unexpected upheavals — coups and revolutions — in many countries where they were least expected. Such was the case in Spain and Portugal, Ethiopia and Iran. Would the USSR's turn come too?

As we were not a full-fledged mission, and were consequently not invited to Red Square for the parade, we watched it on television. There was nothing new: well-fed Soviet marshals in light-blue parade dress drove around in open Zil limousines, receiving permission to proceed from the minister of defence, who wore an enormous peaked cap and stood on the balcony of the Lenin Mausoleum together with the other leaders. The units then marched down Red Square in exemplary order, if not with outstanding enthusiasm. Gorbachev and his companions saluted from the Mausoleum and we wondered how a group of elderly men could stand the piercing cold and hold their water for such a long time.

The first days spent in Moscow made me realize what a terrible waste it would be if we did not use the opportunity to try to improve our official contacts with the Soviet government. The political departments of the Foreign Ministry refused to see or talk with us. We could not go very far if we did not have their backing or approval in our relations with the official organizations. The only contact we had was Ivan Pogrebnoy, a deputy head of the consular department. From the reports I had seen, he did not appear to be very forthcoming. I decided to confront him anyway and pass on a message to the higher political echelons requesting discussion of the current political problems of the Middle East. I requested a meeting through the Netherlands Embassy. A few days later we received word that we could come over to the consular department. I arrived with the minister of the Royal Embassy of the Netherlands, Willem Bentinck.

Pogrebnoy received me courteously. He complimented me on my Russian. His own vocabulary was limited: 'I shall pass on your remarks to the proper authorities.' I pointed out that we were lacking the minimal necessities to conduct our work in Moscow, and I requested to be received by the heads of the political departments of the ministry since I had messages to give them on behalf of the government of Israel. Pogrebnoy repeated his dogmatic refrain. He would not be moved to add anything more substantial. After an hour of pleasantries and general observations, I was satisfied that I had at least told him what I thought. I was certain Pogrebnoy would indeed pass my words on to the proper authorities. This tactic was to become the pattern of my contacts for many days to come.

3 · *Moscow–Zagorsk–Leningrad*

In those early days of November 1988 I found Moscow very much alive with glasnost and struggling with perestroika. I spent a lot of time watching television. The talk shows were overwhelming, not only because of their ponderousness but also because of the unfamiliar freedom of expression. The shackles were being discarded and almost everything was coming into the firing line of criticism and 'new thinking', an expression introduced by Gorbachev and used widely by the media. The Voice of Israel broadcasts were jammed by the Soviets and we had to struggle to make sense of the weak signals we received from the BBC and the Voice of America. Russian radio was expanding its coverage beyond the prescribed limits of strict censorship, but its foreign news was still highly unreliable and slanted. The press, too, was still largely muzzled. The exceptions were the so-called 'thick magazines' or monthlies — Soviet outlets for literary activity and social commentary — which were beginning to question the purity of the Communist Party and the cult of Lenin. Everyone was assessing Gorbachev's chances for political survival. His rush for reform and his opposition to the conservatism of the Politburo and the Central Committee were considered a threat to his longevity. Doubts regarding Gorbachev's own good intentions began cropping up later. Toward the end of 1988 Gorbachev was being commended for his gift of avoiding confrontation and cleverly outmanoeuvring the opposition.