

The Walls Have Ears
(Kishinev, Ukraine, 1973)

When we arrived at the Kishinev train station, we were told that we had the option to take a taxi or walk to our hotel. Peg was still upset about the incident at the border train depot, having to pay the bribe to continue our travel, so she was determined not to pay any more money than absolutely necessary. We schlepped our heavy suitcases, in the ninety-degree humidity, up the steep hills to our assigned hotel.

The hotel's lobby looked like an old, luxurious, nineteenth century hotel, with a grand staircase dominating its presentation to the guests. When we reached the first floor, however, the façade disappeared. At the top of the stairs, behind an old splintered table, sat an imposing matron. Without any hint of expression, she dryly explained that each time we left our rooms, we were to leave our keys with her at the desk.

Peg's father refused to use the shared restroom on the floor, and had paid quite a bit extra in order to have a private, "updated" bathroom. This "modern" bathroom consisted of little more than a deep, claw-foot tub, with exposed pipes and spots of rust. Quickly, we noticed that there was no toilet tissue.

We returned to the matron, sitting without expression at her splintered wooden desk, to inform her that there was no toilet tissue.

"Use paper towel."

"But you can't flush paper towels down the toilet, right?"

In a disgusted dismissal of our naïve petition, she responded "No, no. You put in basket."

This was the “best” hotel for which we had been charged extra? This was the only hotel available for American tourists visiting Kishinev during the middle of the Cold War.

There was also only one restaurant that tourists were supposed to eat at. It advertised a menu of some two hundred options for food and drink, but we discovered that they rarely had more than twenty or thirty options when we tried to order. When we asked for hot tea, they served it to us in glasses without handles, burning our hands at each attempt to drink. Next to us, some Chinese men were drinking their tea in a beautiful silver set, elegant handles and all. Was this intentional?

We walked down the street and passed small groups of people. They whispered and pointed at us. When we approached these small groups, they would break apart and stand in silence with their backs to us until we passed.

Fear.

They could see by our clothes, the way we moved, the sound of our speech, that we were strangers – that we were Americans.

At the end of the street was a building where anyone who wanted to make a phone call or send postal mail out of the city needed to apply for special permission. Sitting on the top of the building was a huge bust of the Communist dictator, Lenin – listening to, and observing, all of the activities of the citizens. Spies everywhere.

Peg’s aunt lived in the main part of the city, in an old, two-room, decaying apartment house. It reminded me of some of the neglected city apartment buildings in New York during the 1950s. Her aunt lived there with her married son, his wife, and his two teenage daughters. They had no hot water – if they wanted some, they’d boil it on a small stove. They would also do this for when they wanted to

take a shower, which consisted of a small hole in the floor in front of the toilet, a chain dangling above to pull for the cold water to cascade down.

When we knocked on the apartment door, we could hear a radio, that was already blasting music, increase in volume considerably. They welcomed us, and immediately ushered us into the corner of the main room. The radio conspicuously continued to blast away. As we sat there, confused, the husband whispered to us: “The walls have ears.”

A warning.

The next morning, a driver and car awaited for us in the front of the hotel. We had paid *Intourist* for a day’s use of the car, so we could take Peg’s mother to visit her parents’ gravesite. She wanted her sister to come with us. The government officials did not want that.

As we were about to get into the car, the driver announced, “Only four can come.” It was clear that the government had ordered him not to allow the sister to travel with us.

Instead of arguing, I told the driver that I would stay. The driver, confused as to how to respond, accepted. So, they went off for the day. I was alone.

I didn’t feel comfortable or safe wandering around the city by myself. I was already full of fear from the daunting intimidation surrounding us since our arrival. Few seemed to speak English, and, even if they did, I got the impression that none were interested, or allowed to be interested, in interacting with me. So, I waited by myself in our hotel room.

Later in that afternoon, I heard a knock at the door.

“You have guest,” said the hotel official.

“What?”

“Relative. Your cousin. Travel to visit.”

I knew of no relatives programmed to come visit us at the hotel. The apprehension of my circumstances increased each minute, as I searched my mind to think of who could be coming to visit.

Without waiting any longer, the official opened the door wide. Into the room lumbered a large, elderly, hulking man.

He greeted me almost too cheerfully in Russian.

Who was he? A Russian spy? Was this a trap?

The official closed the door.

This man sat on one of the wooden, straight backed chairs in the hotel room, I on the other.

For an endless count of minutes, we just sat there facing one another, both afraid to say anything. The mistrust lingering everywhere.

Finally, I pointed at myself: "Robert. I am called 'Robert.'" Then, I pointed at him. "You, what is your name?"

He shook his large hairy head up and down. "Yes. Good. Ro-b-ert." He became excited, almost bouncing in the chair, and pointed to himself. "Me. Moisie. Moisie!"

That seemed to break a little of the ice. We spent the next few hours sharing broken words and communicating through pantomime gestures.

When the others returned from their trip, I found out that he was Peg's uncle, and had somehow gotten special permission to visit outside of his assigned sector of the city.

Peg told me that they had driven to find her grandparent's graves. Along the way, they passed a very nice house. The sister said to Peg's mother, "Isn't that a nice house?" That had been the sister's house before the Communist Revolution. The soldiers had taken their home and small factory because they were Jews and capitalists. Then, they forced her aunt and her husband to walk the road to Siberia.

Soldiers on that road killed her husband, and forced her to live for years in torturous exile in Siberia.

We departed Kishinev for a two-night trip to the city of Odessa, on the shores of the Black Sea. When the train arrived to the station, a young woman official met us to take us to the hotel.

“Tell us,” I asked. “Are there any Jewish synagogues in Odessa?”

“Yes. One,” she answered.

“Is it open?”

“Of course! Open,” she responded. “Churches, synagogues - all open.”

“Can you take us there?”

“It’s much too far.”

“Can you tell us how to get there?”

She became nervous, hesitant. “I...I...don’t remember where is.”

Already uneasy, we let the matter go.

We arrived to the hotel. Much cleaner, and a little more modern than the one in Kishinev.

They led us to our rooms: Peg and I had one room, her parents another, and, in between the two rooms, a noticeably mysterious, empty room.

During the following two days and nights, we watched and heard different men go in and out of that “empty” room, we assumed they were listening and recording our conversations. Outside the hotel, there was a small park. Speakers blared the beginning melody of “Nights of Moscow” every hour.

We went out for a walk along the ocean beach. Stout, Russian men and women wearing tiny bikinis, an abundance of bellies and breasts spilling over, lay on the sand of this tourist destination. A culture with the opposite definition of “beauty” than that to which we were accustomed. The Russians thought we were “sick” because we lacked the obese feature of our bodies. With the Communist

government strictly controlling the banks and the flow of money, they depended on a status defining display of wealth derived from a well-rounded, vodka and fatty food-filled, physique.

We passed a movie theater, showing an American gangster movie from the 1940s. It was clear that this outdated movie was part of the Communist propaganda campaign, portraying life in the United States as chaotic and criminal.

Before leaving for this trip, Lou and Mona Sherman had asked us to help them with an effort to communicate with oppressed Soviet Jews. They had organized a letter writing campaign by Jews in the U.S. to the Jews in the Soviet Union. These letters were written with the intention to serve as a testament to the Soviets that the international community was aware that these Jews existed, and were being discriminated against. Lou and Mona had asked us to personally deliver these letters to a family in Odessa.

We wanted to fulfill our promise. Due to her age, Peg's mother, who was our primary translator for Russian, was physically not able to venture through questionable parts of Odessa in search of the address. We had to rely on Peg's German language skills, with its closeness to the Yiddish language, to find our way to the address that the Sherman's had given us.

After twists and turns, finding ourselves in the dark, slum apartment districts, we finally found the address. We knocked at the apartment door. No answer. No one at home.

What to do? We couldn't leave a note or a message. Someone might find it and report them to the authorities. There was a woman across the hall who warily peered out from her door in our direction. Who can you trust not to be a spy? We smiled, nodded our heads, and left without speaking to the woman. We did not want to get these people into trouble.

A failed mission. At least we could tell Mona and Lou that we had made a sincere effort to deliver their message. We would later learn of the plight of the Soviet Jews, too many who unjustly suffered during those horrible years.