



Yesterday's Gone

by Cathy Young

Less than a year after the hardline coup in Moscow, Gorbachev, back from the United States, gives an interview to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* blasting Yeltsin for his handling of economic reform and for allegedly imposing a media blackout on his U.S. tour: How else, he grumbles, could one explain the fact that the Russian press wrote a lot less about it than did the American press? A week later, the ex-Soviet president is stripped of his government ZIL limousine and given a Volga sedan instead, the rank-and-file bureaucrat's car. Russian newspapers speculate that this is in retaliation for the interview.

Meanwhile, the Russian news agency IMA Press reports in *Izvestia* that Gorbachev is buying a house in Florida—a “standard two-story home” at 16 Senator Drive, Tropical Gulf Acres, Charlotte County, Florida, for \$108,350. Maybe he'll buy himself a Mercedes to replace the ZIL.

Speaking of government limos, the May 31 segment of “60 Minutes” on continuing *nomenklatura* privilege was quite an eye-opener. Special stores where high-level officials can buy food and consumer goods at a fraction of the market price are alive and well. And then there's all the money former Communist bigshots are pumping into private businesses and joint ventures. On hand to condemn these doings was our old friend Vladimir Pozner, a great authority on people who manage to prosper under any régime.

The zest with which *nomenklatura* bosses have been reinventing themselves as democrats and/or capitalists casts a pall over the heartening, if slow, devel-

opment of entrepreneurship. The “Ethics and Law” page of the *Literary Gazette* (May 27) carries an unsigned letter to the weekly's legal commentator Arkady Vaksberg (whose book *The Soviet Mafia* was reviewed in these pages last month). The correspondent, whose letter is titled “I Am Scared,” says that he is more fearful of criticizing local crooks now than he was in the Brezhnev era:

Former bosses have transformed themselves into democrats, set up firms, companies, and small businesses; even here in the boondocks, it's all Western-style, with various “funds” and “associations”—and real power is still in their hands just as it used to be. . . . Those who protest . . . are dealt with very simply, without involving any party committees, police, or prosecutors: a knife in the chest, a bullet in the heart, or something like that.

A friend of the writer's was apparently beaten and slashed in the street in broad daylight, after having written a letter to the local paper exposing the ex-manager of a state enterprise who used stolen money to open a private shop. Vaksberg notes that, while the writer relies more on feelings than facts, the feelings can't just be brushed off, especially since, judging from readers' mail, the anonymous writer is far from alone.

A similarly grim image of daily life emerges from a May article in the *Independent Gazette* by Alexander Balkovsky, “If You Are Scared, Defend Yourself.” Balkovsky describes various methods denizens of the Commonwealth of Independent States use to protect themselves from ruffians in these uncertain times, including specially trained dogs (a Rottweiler costs up to 15,000 rubles, a German shepherd

2,000 to 10,000); metal doors (6,000 to 15,000); Mace (400 to 700 rubles a can) and gas pistols (about 10,000). (Stun guns, evidently, are still too rare to have a meaningful market price.)

By the end of summer, the Russian parliament will consider a draft bill on private ownership of weapons. The “necessity” of legalizing Mace and gas pistols, says Balkovsky, “is not questioned by anyone.” As for guns, “the arguments of proponents and opponents are well-known: ‘con’—there will be shootouts in the streets; ‘pro’—an armed population will be more difficult to dominate.” Advocates of putting weapons in the hands of citizens are found across the political spectrum: many “liberals” support it as a matter of individual rights, many “conservatives” as one of law-and-order.

So far, officials at the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs and members of the parliamentary commission on law and crime have only the vaguest notion of what the legislation will entail. According to one official, all that is certain is that “for the foreseeable future, instruments of self-defense will be manufactured and sold to the population by the government, and will be registered and monitored by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.” Some factories already manufacture test models of Mace-like chemical spray cans and gas pistols, supposedly “more reliable than the imported self-defense weapons that are flooding our markets,” and are ready to market them as soon as appropriate legislation is passed.

Meanwhile, Boris Yeltsin recently signed a decree allowing private detectives and security guards to carry guns. This is the first time, notes Balkovsky, that “the state intends to entrust weapons to people who are not in government

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service.” (Some officials worry that criminals will be able to get guns through these private agencies.) Private detectives will also be allowed to investigate criminal cases provided that they notify the law enforcement agencies. Few Russians will be able to take advantage of private security arrangements: one of the country’s best-known private detective agencies (in another sign of the times, they have been around for a while without the benefit of laws or decrees), the Alex Agency, charges between 120 rubles and \$15 an hour, depending on the services rendered. The less well-heeled, says Balkovsky, can make themselves safer by using any aerosol deodorant spray with an “Avoid Eye Contact” label, and hairspray’s even better. Finally: “If you can’t afford a deodorant, you can throw salt or tobacco in the hoodlum’s eyes. If you can’t even afford salt or tobacco, a handful of sand will do.”

An Ode to the Trader

On a more optimistic note, in the same “Lifestyles” section a few days later (May 13), Evgeny Bilkis celebrates Russia’s new social class: the traders. He points out that gypsies, who used to sell rare consumer goods all over Moscow, have either disappeared or melted into the crowds of ethnically undifferentiated peddlers. Nor are Central Asians and Caucasus natives—other groups traditionally scorned as traders in the old Soviet days—very prominent in the markets that have sprung up around the Russian capital. The same “grannies” who used to curse at the damned profiteers have now joined their ranks: there they are, selling their rainy-day stockpiles (coffee, canned foods, even cheese and butter—until the city authorities recently banned street sales of perishables, claiming danger of food poisoning). “It seems that all it took for our eternally victimized, charmingly impractical Russian people to enlist as merchants,” writes Bilkis, “was *official permission*. And then it’s full speed ahead—not one peep about honor or conscience.”

Young people are selling too, “hanging about stacks of beer cases and sipping beer themselves, chatting and flirting with fellow vendors. . . . No one tries to teach them how to live their lives. No one demands to know why strong, able-

bodied young people like them are not welding steel or wielding sledgehammers.” Gone are the days of shadowy trading spots where hobbyists traded rare books, radio parts, stamps or coins, always ready to disperse at the command of a militiaman; gone are the old flower ladies fleeing in fear; gone is the shame-faced profiteer of yesteryear with his “furtive, guilty look, whispered offers, and stooped shoulders. . . . It’s all a thing of the past now.”

Day of the Living Dead

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, once known as Forever Alive, had his 122nd birthday on April 22, the first since the collapse of his creation. A couple of days in advance, about a thousand of the faithful gathered by the Lenin museum with flowers for their chief, where they were confronted by some protesters, one carrying a poster captured by a *Kommersant* photographer: “COMMIES REPENT!” In the Moscow daily *Kuranty*, the fervidly anti-Communist columnist Aleksandr Ivanov offered a survey of his mail on the subject of Lenin, awarding first prize to a letter from a retired gentleman who branded Vladimir Ilyich “a traitor to his country, a hypocrite, and a demagogue.” Second prize went to a letter from an eighth-grader named Masha, who had read in some Russian version of the *National Enquirer* a story about an archeologist raped and impregnated by the 500-year-old mummy of an Inca chief. “Now,” wrote Masha, “I am afraid to visit the Mausoleum on Red Square.”

The leader and teacher was accorded somewhat more reverential treatment in the moderately pro-Communist former CPSU periodicals surveyed by *Kommersant* (April 20-27). The weekly *Glasnost* describes Lenin as “a man of tragic fate whose soul was illuminated from on high with superhuman wisdom and the highest nobility,” a characterization whose mystical overtones should have made the birthday boy turn in his Mausoleum. In the weekly *Moskvichka*, loyal Leninist Natalya Morozova (see *TAS*, August 1990) defends the great man from charges of destroying the clergy: “Let’s set the record straight: it’s not just priests who were shot, but only those priests who collaborated with the White Guards. Was it cruel? Of course. But if you are a man of God, you should keep to religious activities.”

And in *Pravda* (April 23), commentator V. Bushin looks at Lenin’s first two months in power and compares them favorably to Yeltsin’s. Yeltsin, you see, took some time off to vacation in the Crimea, while Lenin worked indefatigably, chairing meetings, making reports and speeches, giving pep talks to factory workers and so on. Comrade Bushin unaccountably neglects to mention the fact that Lenin also had plenty of people shot and jailed and plenty of newspapers shut down—and don’t you think that wasn’t hard work.

Meanwhile, the tri-weekly *Vecherniy Klub* or Evening Club, a supplement to the daily *Vechernyaya Moskva*, reports (April 16) that Chelyabinsk sociologist Dmitry Mityukov has developed a unique method of identifying a Bolshevik type of personality, a secret he sells for just ten rubles. After he advertised in *Argumenty i Fakty*, Mityukov was deluged with mail. Ninety percent of the letter-writers wanted to test someone else for Bolshevik tendencies; only five percent wanted to test themselves. □

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Lies We Live

by James Bowman

As I was coming out of *Housesitter*, directed by Frank Oz, I overheard someone say: "Well, that's nice, isn't it? Glorifying a pathological liar!" I have since read critics who have taken this view of the film. Now, I like to think of myself as rather unfashionably attached to the idea of objective truth, but I can't help thinking that these people have rather missed the point about *Housesitter* (whose title is itself a lie, the picture having nothing whatever to do with housesitters). Goldie Hawn's moving into Steve Martin's dream house and telling everybody that she is his wife is not meant to glorify lying but to make the point that pretending to be something we're not is a way of becoming what we want to be.

Is that lying? Well, yes and no. Art itself is a lie—which is why Plato, who makes Jesse Helms look like Andy Warhol, objected to it—but, paradoxically, it is a lie in the service of truth. So is the role-playing we have to engage in in order to learn good behavior. From Hamlet's injunction to his mother to "assume a virtue if you have it not" to "Whistle a happy tune" ("for when I fool the people I fear I fool myself as well") it has been widely recognized that the mask you put on, whether for good reasons or bad, tends to stick to your face. The lie becomes a kind of retroactive truth.

Housesitter, of course, goes way over the top and makes virtually every lie freely convertible into truth. But overstatement, especially in comedy, can help to make the point. Martin and Hawn become husband and wife through pretending to be husband and wife; the street people she persuades to masquerade as her parents begin to treat her like parents,

and in the end their own house is being built adjacent to that of the newlyweds. They too have become, at least in one sense, what they only pretended to be.

And that much is true, even if the rest is lies. In love you have to believe it is true before it can become true. It is significant that the story Goldie Hawn makes up to account for her imaginary romance makes the same point: she claims that she had met Martin after a car accident that resulted in her face being swathed in bandages. He had proposed, she says, and actually married her before seeing what she looked like. He had to take the risk of believing before he could know. Likewise, the girl who jilted Martin (Dana Delany) only realizes that he is lovable after someone else has taken the risk of loving him, when she can see him, as she says, through *her* eyes.

All this is rather like what St. Augustine says about faith in God: that we must believe in order to know, rather than expecting to base our belief upon our knowledge. Unfortunately, Hollywood is not so good with faith as it can be, from time to time, with love. *Sister Act* also has as its central idea someone learning to believe by pretending to be a believer. Whoopi Goldberg plays a lounge singer who witnesses a murder and, in order to avoid being killed before she can testify against its perpetrator, goes to hide out in a convent. By pretending to be a nun she acquires some of the faith of the real nuns, and, this being Hollywood, the real nuns are depicted as having learned from Ms. Goldberg not only how to boogie but also how to break out of their cloister into "the community."

Somebody ought to tell the director, Emile Ardolino, that he is not the first person to have thought of bringing pop

music into church or turning nuns into hip, happening gals and social workers. It's been tried before—and with results that do *not* include the transformation of run-down urban neighborhoods into hotbeds of devotion. That's what happens here, however, when Whoopi teaches her night-club shtick, a pastiche of the girl groups of the sixties, to the choir. "My Guy" (rendered as "My God") and "I Will Follow Him" (about guess Who) are done affectingly, it is true, but their power for me is based upon the innocence and wholesomeness of such devotion, whether to a teenage boy or to God Almighty, which thirty years later has become mere camp. Nobody really *believes* that stuff, says *Sister Act*, but it's great to get together, in the presence of the Pope if possible, clap our hands to the old tunes, and try to remember what it was like to believe.

There are, it seems, limitations on our ability to become what we impersonate. We can go crazy, for instance. The character played by Jeff Goldblum in *The Favor, the Watch and the Very Big Fish* believes at various times that he is Chopin, Schubert, Johann Strauss, and Jesus. Bob Hoskins, who plays a Parisian photographer of devotional subjects, is responsible for the last delusion by casting him as Jesus in his tableaux. It is then reinforced by a freak accident which makes him think he has restored a blind boy's sight. Unfortunately, it turns out that he can only walk on water for five or six steps before sinking out of sight for good.

The point is that there is a kind of power in his madness, just as there is in Goldie Hawn's lies, to make the world seem in fact, at least for a moment, what we know someone is only pretending that it is. And that this power is not necessarily a bad thing. At one point, a

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