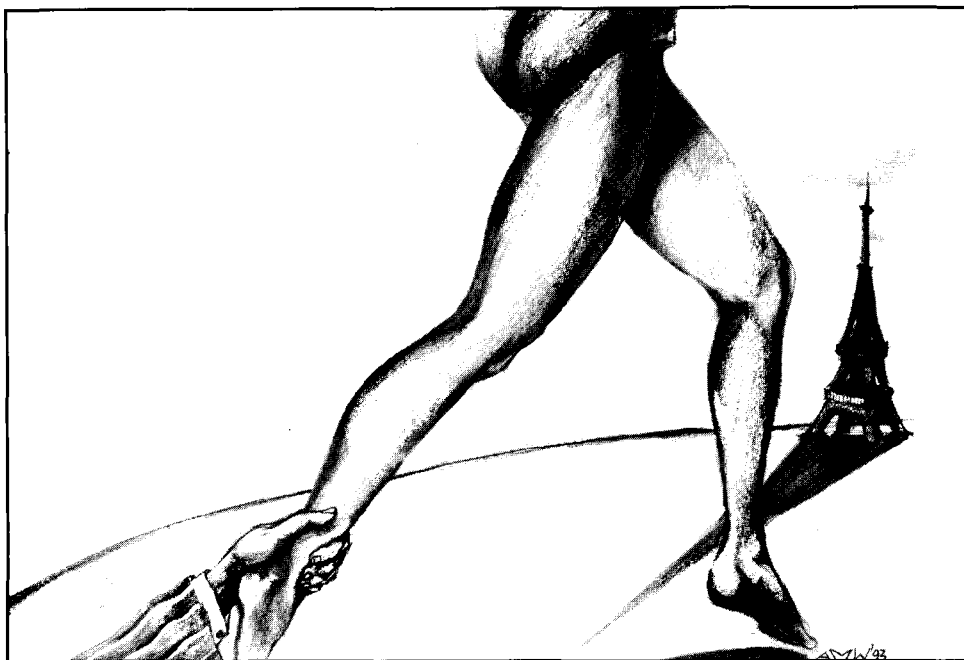


Red Panties

by Akosh Chernush



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Vanessa was the first American woman in my life. “You forced a superpower to her knees,” congratulated my friend Peter, when I told him what had happened the previous night. Things went considerably quicker in Paris in 1958; I had no reason to beat around the bush posing questions about bisexual lovers, blood transfusions, or junky boyfriends. Vanessa herself obviously wasn’t a superpower; however, as an East European full of 50’s macho, I felt some pride that I had successfully swept a native of the American superpower off her feet, even though she was not exactly the type that I’d generally imagined Americans to be. She was beautiful, with impeccable curves, gorgeous long legs, a great sense of humor and self-irony that redeemed almost everything else, even the fact that she was a radical Marxist.

I picked her up in a Montparnasse bistro, the Select, where Peter and I dropped in often, sometimes several times a day, to check for anything new on the flesh market. We sat down at a table next to hers and borrowed her Zippo to light up yellow Gauloises, cheap French cigarettes of industrial strength. We started a conversation in our heavily accented but already fluent French. The girl was noticeably intrigued by us when she learned that we were Hungarian students who had fled to France after the Soviet repression of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. “*Vous êtes contre-révolutionnaires, alors?*” she asked with pretended fear, as if the next second we would attack, with knives between our teeth, the international revolution. World revolution was her all. Vanessa was a Trotskyite, and she rushed to explain to us that the Russian communists committed a fatal mistake when they tried to build communism in a poor country without any democratic tradition. “You may con-

demn what the Soviets did in Hungary,” she continued. “I am not for violence, but on the other hand, the Soviets had to do something, because communism still hadn’t deep enough roots in Hungary.” I almost lost my temper when she went on explaining to me what had really happened two years ago in Budapest.

Before and after I met Vanessa, a good many other French, American, and German leftists tried to explain to me what had happened in Budapest, ignoring the reality that I had personally witnessed almost every important development leading to the Revolution and its defeat. Later, for my participation in some revolutionary events and for several anti-Soviet articles I had published in the revolutionary press in Budapest, a so-called people’s court condemned me to death in absentia. These leftist students usually repeated fellow-traveler arguments, which openly or in veiled form defended the Soviet action in Hungary. Some of them remembered the large headline of a Paris communist daily, which had sent its best reporter, André Stil, to Budapest. Stil affirmed after the Soviet invasion, on the front page of *L’Humanité*, that “Budapest smiles again.” A first-year student at the elitist École Normale Supérieure reproached me that “you Hungarians, with your unnecessary little rebellion, endangered the super-powers’ peaceful coexistence.” She added, “next time consider the political realities before you move even your little finger!”

In 1958, it was still difficult to score if one wasn’t well versed in and kindly disposed to Marxist dialectics. Most of the girls I met at the Sorbonne, the student cafeterias, or the bistros were Marxists, some kind of leftists, radicals, Third Worldists, or else they had cats and preoccupations in which I could not be involved or to which I could not add my word. I had run away from Hungarian comrades; now in Montparnasse, I confronted American ones, young Jane Fonda types, before they

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converted to aerobics or married media moguls.

I tried to argue with them, stay civilized, but it was difficult to persuade a convinced fellow traveler. A communist? Impossible. Only once did I get in a real rage. That was Christmas, 1957: I was invited to celebrate the day with a leftist but otherwise quite nice couple. The young wife was an American, raised in Ecuador in a diplomatic family; her husband, Tala, a painter, was also a refugee, from Franco's Spain. He had a good reputation in artistic circles and was a fanatic communist. This became obvious when the Hungarian Revolution arose in conversation and I found myself defending Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty against Tala's accusation that this head of the Hungarian Catholic Church, jailed by the communists and liberated during the Revolution, was a fascist counterrevolutionary who had worked for the reestablishment of feudal estates and sought refuge in the U.S. Embassy in Budapest after the Soviet invasion of Hungary. For several reasons Mindszenty wasn't an especial hero of mine, but I felt it wasn't fair to malign somebody who was persecuted after the Nazi occupation of Hungary for trying to save Jewish lives and who, against the communists, courageously resisted as long as he could. Tala sarcastically inquired, "How many acres from collective farms has your cardinal promised you?" The situation became ludicrous. Christmas or not, I'd been drinking, and I got mad, yelled "*J'en ai assez*," took my coat, and left without saying goodbye.

Peter wasn't interested in Vanessa. But he saw that I liked the American girl. Before letting me lose my temper the way I had at Tala's, he whispered to me in Hungarian: "What is your priority? You want to discuss politics or you want to . . . ?" Peter was right. I quickly came up with a joke about the difference between a Stalinist and a Trotskyite. We then took a long walk, ate a cheap couscous dinner at Rue St-Gregoire de Tours, drank some Algerian wine, and spent a beautiful night together.

Interestingly, most of the women who became close to me in the coming years belonged politically to my enemy's camp. I later settled in the States, and, in New York, dated Sharon for almost two years. Once she took me home for Thanksgiving dinner and presented me thus to her parents: "This is my sweet little fascist." All four of us smiled idiotically. Her father, a New York lawyer who, in his youth, fought in Spain as a member of the Lincoln Battalion, mentioned that he had met several Hungarian volunteers during that civil war and dropped the name of Ernó Geró, one of the most hated Hungarian Party leaders of '56. It was well known that Geró, at party command, studied Catalan in Moscow, traveled to Spain by orders from Stalin, and tortured and murdered Trotskyite and anarchist activists in Barcelona basements. But I kept my mouth shut. I was so fond of Sharon that I was prepared to accept every insult, every humiliation, just to hold her and love her.

I wondered if it was really Vanessa's, or Sharon's, fault that she was fed drawing-room communism along with her mother's milk? That since childhood she was brainwashed at home? That her indoctrination began each morning at the breakfast table? Later, even my wife, not a product of an even slightly pink environment, asked me unexpectedly: "Something I still can't understand is why almost 100 percent of your suffering East Europeans always vote for the Communist Party? If they really don't like the regime, as you seem sure, they just don't have to vote. It's impossible to punish or exterminate a whole nation because it refuses to vote. I'm not talking about mal-

content individuals, I mean nations, and if whole peoples still go vote, then they have only themselves to blame." Another time she noted that "it is impossible to have an intimate dinner with you. Around the table, next to us, there always sit the communist regimes." Our eventual divorce had nothing to do with politics. Although far apart, we telephoned each other when the Berlin Wall collapsed, and we both cried from happiness.

There was another telling episode in my relations with Vanessa, not in France, but in the States, where I first went as a tourist in the summer of 1959. Vanessa had returned several months earlier to continue her studies at Barnard. At my arrival, she was vague, finally confessing that she had a kind of steady boyfriend—Rufus!—but everything got back into the old groove the moment we got horizontal. She showed me New York from Central Park to Greenwich Village. When we arrived at the Museum of Modern Art, even my poor English allowed me to understand her saying to the lady cashier: "Please give me a ticket, and a children's ticket for my cousin," pointing at me. The cashier looked at me, perplexed because not only was I older than Vanessa but I looked older as well. Vanessa explained, "My cousin comes from Europe and appears older because he suffered a lot during the Hungarian counter-revolution." What she said seemed so absurd and surprising that the confused cashier immediately let me go in on a child's ticket. I couldn't complain; she saved me money. The fast one that she had pulled cheered up both of us, and she could rise to the occasion and tease me politically again.

After the MOMA visit, we walked to the East Side and took a bus to the Ukrainian section of the Lower East Side where, according to Vanessa, there was a restaurant with the best Romanian pastrami sandwich in the world. Vanessa figured I should have one because she knew that you can't find pastrami in Europe, especially not in Romania. Vanessa came from an Irish Catholic family, with an uncle who had been a missionary to China and a cousin who worked as a Maryknoll sister in Bolivia. She explained that here, in the world's greatest city, everybody is a little bit Jewish, even Italians, Irish, and Anglos, at least in diet. At the same time, many Jewish kids have Christmas trees, and on St. Patrick's Day, Jews join Harlem Baptists to help the Irish celebrate along Fifth Avenue. "Personally, I like the fact that we celebrate so many different holidays," Vanessa remarked, "because I'm an atheist and atheists have no red-letter days."

I began to feel the jet lag as we walked from the bus station to the restaurant. Vanessa, still full of energy, quickened her steps, putting a distance between us. She prankishly challenged me to "Look! I walk like a black girl. Dad always says I walk like a Negro." I had no idea how black women walked or that such generalizations can be justified; however, I obediently looked and admired because I loved her legs and behind. Back in Paris I had often dropped back so she could walk a bit ahead of me just so I could enjoy watching her shapely long legs and her magnificent derriere, which was outlined by the seams of her panties. I confessed to her once that, while I couldn't stand her political views, every time I glanced at her my breathing stopped.

As I wished we were back home, we entered the nearly empty restaurant. A waiter of Methuselah's vintage brought us three-story-high hot pastrami on pumpernickel with Polish pickles and Dijon mustard, nicely cut in two and held togeth-

er with toothpicks that had miniature paper flags. The pastami was as good and as unusual as promised, but too rich for a Hungarian stomach now accustomed to French food. "Good, but too heavy," I told the old man when he came to refill our coffee cups. "I never said it's light," he answered. "It's heavy and probably killed more Jews than Hitler. I wouldn't touch it at my age. Order something lighter next time, smoked turkey or tuna fish. When Trotsky came here, he ate tuna fish." Vanessa had seemed bored earlier, but she came to life and said, "Trotsky really came here? When?"

"Oh, a long time ago, early in the century. He often ate there at the same table where you're eating," the waiter replied, sitting down opposite us, as he sensed that in Vanessa he'd found an audience. "He lived on the West Side, but he came here, liked our food, and most of the time I had to wait on his table because I was the youngest. The other waiters avoided serving him as much as they could. Trotsky never tipped. And at that time, we lived from tips; we had no formal salary, no minimum hourly pay, no nothing. I frankly said to him once, Mr. Bronstein (that's how we knew him then), my father is a scholarly man and he hasn't found a job yet, my mother works in a dressmaker's shop and doesn't make much money, I have three sisters and a brother, and tips are my only income. Why don't you give me a few cents? Bronstein said that he would never give anything to the capitalists' lackeys. He called me a lackey. Me, a kid of 13! I would never forgive that. And he just cut the conversation, returning to the pages of an agriculture magazine, looking at tractor advertisements. Next time I again called his attention to this tip thing, and he answered: Why don't you form a union? Why let yourself be exploited?"

Vanessa became noticeably gloomy, but she faithfully interpreted for me in French everything that I didn't catch in English. "Trotsky went home, they had this big mess in Russia, and there were voices saying we must go back, for working people Russia is the right place now, there will be no exploitation," the old man continued. "First of all, that time, when the Bolsheviks came to power, my family was doing something better here. One of my sisters married a very rich man, and my parents had no desire to move again. My father said if Trotsky didn't care about you here in New York, why would he care about you over there? If he didn't understand the little man here, why would he understand him over there? I was sorry when I heard that in Mexico somebody had put an ice pick in his head; after all, he used to eat my tuna sandwiches, and even if he wasn't a good man, he was clever. If he had stayed in America, he could have gone into real estate and had office buildings downtown, skyscrapers even. Real estate was the best business. And even if he didn't make a fortune, at least his children could make it here, they could become dentists or lawyers, like my kids."

I paid for the sandwiches; Vanessa, finding my tip insufficient, left a whole dollar on the table—this back in the days when a dollar was still money, especially to a student from Europe. "If Trotsky really didn't leave tips, then Trotskyites must help," she said, but later began doubting what we had heard. "The old waiter talked nonsense. I've read several Trotsky biographies and an essay about his sojourn in America. Maybe he did forget to tip once in a while, but nothing I've read ever accused him of being insensitive or stingy. He was a generous man." "Do some research," I suggested. "That could be a great subject for a doctoral dissertation." Three weeks later, before

I flew back to Paris, and as I kissed her good-bye in her West End Avenue high-ceiling apartment, her poster of the non-tipping old goat in grey Bolshevik uniform still hung on the kitchen wall. For a while, we corresponded; then, we lost touch with each other forever. At least that's what I thought.

Do all roads lead to Washington as they did 2,000 years ago to Rome? I don't know the answer to that, but I know that since I moved to Washington, I've encountered most of my old friends and acquaintances from Paris. They have come as tourists, government officials, museum curators, a zoo director, and one is even here as free Hungary's ambassador. Recently, even childhood pals and schoolmates have arrived by the dozens; after having lived as pariahs for years behind the iron curtain, they now travel as World Bank economists, musicians, writers, members of parliament, and historians who spend their days at the Library of Congress. I wasn't especially surprised even to encounter Vanessa. But what is almost unbelievable is that I recognized her by the back of her calves! She was walking her Labrador in Georgetown's Montrose Park, when I spotted that rear view. If I had encountered her face-to-face on the street I might not have recognized her. The black-haired Parisian had become a Washington redhead. She had gained a few kilos. She wore fancy designer glasses. But from the back, those calves were so familiar that I couldn't not recognize them. "Vanessa McQuinn, I presume," I said to her. She did not recognize me immediately, but when she did, she was delighted to see me.

Smiling, we sat on a park bench. "I never thought that you'd end up in the States, much less that we'd be neighbors without knowing it," she remarked. Then she lectured me because I still smoke. Waving away my cigarette smoke with a disgusted grimace, she informed me that she had stopped in 1964. She mentioned that she worked for a labor union, and, like myself, had been divorced for several years. We no longer spoke in French, the language of our youth, but in English, the language of making a living, of adulthood. So many things had happened since we last saw each other that politics were not discussed for a while. She seemed much less interested in political events now than 30 years ago. Finally I asked her if she had ever imagined that the Soviet Union would collapse so spectacularly, and during our lifetime. She said that she never thought this would happen and added in a pedagogical tone, "I don't have to tell you that this collapse would have never happened if Trotsky had been the leader instead of that paranoid mass murderer who ruled things for decades."

The memories of our passionate lovemaking and of the physical joys we had given one another in the past created a bond between us. But she could read on my face as I could detect in her eyes that these past 30-some years had done no good for our relationship. The elemental attraction that brought us together originally, overcoming even our embarrassing political differences, had vanished. Without saying it, we felt sadness as we realized that regrettably we can't turn back time. We knew we'd meet again, invite each other to parties, be friends; still, what happened in Paris can't be repeated or brought back.

It began to drizzle. She said that she had to go feed her dog. I kissed her cheek, and just to add something more personal I remarked, "Your legs are more exciting than ever." Vanessa unexpectedly switched to French and inquired, "*Et mon derrière?*"

©

Who Cares Who's Number One?

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

"All the great things have been done by little nations."

—Benjamin Disraeli

Preparing For the Twenty-First Century

by Paul Kennedy
New York: Random House;
428 pp., \$25.00

The Passionate Attachment: America's Involvement With Israel, 1947 to the Present

by George W. Ball and Douglas B. Ball
New York: W.W. Norton;
328 pp., \$24.95

There is definitely less to Paul Kennedy's new book than might appear on the surface of it. *Preparing for the Twenty-First Century* is an odd combination of old-fashioned doomsday alarmism, the modern lust for total planning, and the equally contemporary demand for a future free of risk and insecurity. It is also written in as bland and pedestrian a style as that of any journalist or public academic on this side of the Atlantic; if Professor Kennedy is a fair indicator, then the British hegemony in respect of the English language has gone the way of the British hegemony in respect of economics, which is to say it has been Americanized. Perhaps in the 21st century it will be Nipponized as well.

Whatever new ideas are in this book, I must have missed by inadvertent catnapping. Kennedy's thesis is the already familiar argument that the so-called global economy, human mass migration, and environmental crisis are all factors in a process of transnational change that, in addition to being resistant to national control, have rendered the nation-state "the wrong sort of unit"—either too large or too small—to handle problems of historically unprecedented size and

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twenty separate nation-states simply cannot do." The "profundity of international change," Kennedy believes, "demanding new thinking and new structures, strengthens the position of those who argue that Europe simply cannot stand still."

Professor Kennedy concedes that the nation-state is likely to hang around for a while, as it remains the "primary locus of identity of most people," the "chief institution through which societies will try to respond to change." Yet only such states as are willing to pursue "new thinking and new structures" will have a chance at being Number One—or Two, or Three, or Four—in the 21st century, a global status that Kennedy regards as both quantifiable and significant. The Professor's Benthamite, pushpin-as-good-as-poetry bias is expressed by his deprecation of Britain's willingness at the end of the last century to muddle through in accordance with national tradition rather than seek to retain its pre-eminent position in the world by aping foreign ones. If, in order to maintain an industrial edge over Japan, economic logic suggests the need for the United States to reorganize itself as a society of ant-people engaged in regulated calisthenics together, that possibility, Kennedy seems to imply, is worth considering at least so far as it is compatible with American values and customs: further, perhaps, since he goes on to inveigh against "fundamentalist forces, partly in reaction to globalization, gather[ing] strength to lash back, while even in democracies, nationalist and anti-foreign political movements gain ground—all of which hurts their long-term chances of 'preparing' for the future." (One hundred thirty-two pages later, the author offhandedly remarks that "societies which possess technical and educational resources, ample funds, and *cultural solidarity* [my italics] are better positioned for the next century than

scope. These problems, what is more, cannot be dealt with by armed force, but only by international cooperation and a "relocation of authority" both upward or downward—preferably upward, since Kennedy is clearly uncomfortable with the present assertiveness of the smaller units active in the world today, which he seems to find exemplified by the ethnic separatism of the Serbian nationalists and uncooperative elements within the republics of the former Soviet Union. He is a proponent of the European Community, since "the larger logic of historical change favors the integrationists" and "Europe surely has no real alternative to *moving forward*, seeking to create an influential and responsible entity capable of meeting . . . challenges collectively in a way that twelve or