Reading Your Stasi

by Theodore Dalrymple (June 2015)

Nostalgia, that affection for the past that almost inevitably increases with age, is often derided as dangerous or reactionary because it is mistaken for a desire for a return to that past. This is a mistake: nostalgia is not a political programme and would not be nostalgia at all if it did not entail an awareness that the past cannot be returned to, that it is irrecoverable, that Time's arrow flies in one direction only, and that (to reverse the Leninist justification for the most frightful bestiality), you cannot make eggs out of an omelette. And the fact that many people excoriate nostalgia because they take it for a political programme demonstrates just how politicised our minds and souls have become, probably a consequence of the greatly increased size and influence of the state in our lives. It is true that nostalgia may serve to make us prudent or cautious, for it reminds us that loss is as possible as gain, and indeed is often inseparable from it; but it is not in itself an obstacle to progress, any more than it is a defence against deterioration. If one does not regret the past, one regrets one's life.

Of course nostalgia can easily attach to unworthy or even evil objects. Old Nazis, it is said, liked to meet and talk about the 'good old days,' the 'best' time of their lives. By best is meant the time that they most enjoyed, not the time in which they did most good or did least harm. At a much lower level of perversity, one may be nostalgic for things that one would certainly *not* want to go back to, such as the food of one's childhood or the classroom of a bad teacher. Nostalgia seems to have its own laws that are not those of everyday judgment.

I say this because I have a nostalgia for something that I detested at the time and detest still, namely communism as it was practised in Eastern Europe. I have not gone soft in the head, nor changed my opinion of it; but I sometimes wished it was still there so that I could experience the thrill of crossing the Iron Curtain. I recognise that this is an entirely self-indulgent wish, for it pits my enjoyment of a relatively fleeting sensation against the prolonged suffering of millions of people: I certainly wouldn't act upon it, but what is so is so and the thoughts that run through my mind run through my mind.

The last lines of Cavafy's famous poem, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, run:

> And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
> They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Communists were also a kind of solution for us for many years; the world they created was something near, bordering and threatening us, that was worse, far worse, than anything that we had, no matter what our dissatisfactions with what we had might have been. When this something was snatched from us by its unexpected collapse, we were left with our dissatisfactions naked and unadorned, as it were, without the consolation for them that the existence of communism not very far away offered us. The communists simplified the world for us, in the way that a man whose life is threatened does not worry about what he is going to have for dinner, or what colour to paint his study.

But in my case there is something much more personal, less abstract and philosophical, to my nostalgia for the days of the Iron Curtain than that. I miss the atmosphere of the communist days: the dim lights, the unanimated streets, the absence of traffic, the smell of bad, adulterated fuel that polluted the air, the hushed voices, the echoing footfall, the grey dilapidation, the feeling of satisfaction if one found anything to eat, and above all the frisson of fear that one was being watched and followed. For a young man such as I – with an easy escape route, of course, for I do not pretend that my experience had anything to do, or bore any comparison with, that of the people actually living in those countries – the idea that I might be considered dangerous enough to be watched or followed was flattering, for in my own country I was of no account whatsoever. And then, on the very brief occasions when one made human contact with someone in those benighted, oppressed lands, that were like flashes of lightning that illuminated for a second a black landscape, one sensed a person with an intensity of experience much deeper than one's own, a person who lived on a philosophical plane, whose life had been stripped down to the essential: and whom, with foolish romanticism, one almost envied. What did I have to set against their problems: an unhappy childhood, uncertainty about my career? Mere trifles by comparison with the *peine forte et dure* that was life in the Peoples' Republics, most of which I visited, incidentally, when their more sanguinary phase was over, although not beyond possibility of resuscitation.

Needless to say, my enjoyment of trips behind the Iron Curtain was not really much different from that of people who enjoy the Chamber of Horrors in Madame Tussaud's waxworks, where they thrill to the figures and accoutrements of notorious murderers without in the least wishing to be murdered themselves. My enjoyment behind the Iron Curtain was salacious, prurient and self-indulgent, with just enough of a grain of philosophy thrown in to assure myself that I had a higher purpose in thus enjoying myself.

So I do not claim for my nostalgia any superior sensibility, much less a proper role in political thought or philosophy. In fact, I am rather ashamed of it, that I am capable of looking back on what was a terrible period for millions with something like affection. But so

it is: the heart has its reasons that reason knows not of. And all my nostalgia (which is infrequent, I do not want to give the impression that it plays an important part in my life, or that I was at the time anything other than a convinced Cold Warrior) returned in force when I happened upon a memoir of life in East Germany – one of only two communist states, unless you count Mongolia, Sao Tomé e Principe, Guinea Bissau and Cabo Verde, that I never visited – titled *Red Love: the Story of an East German Family*, by a German journalist and newspaper editor called Maxim Leo.

Born in 1970, the author had 19 years of living in a workers' paradise and then quickly made his way in the new conditions of freedom, which he came with equal speed to consider normal, as if tyranny were somehow unnatural. (I remember being impressed by young people in Ceausescu's Romania who told me that, though they had known nothing else, they knew that how they were living in Romania was not *normal.*) But Maxim Leo's memoir is not a mere propagandistic paean of praise to liberty as we know it – or perhaps I should say as we once knew it, since it seems to be eroding like a cliff before repeated strong tides. Rather, it is a subtle exploration of the contorted psychology induced by totalitarianism. For it should go without saying than no regime can survive evoking only uncompromising opposition: it must have some supporters, and appeal to the interests of a proportion of the population.

The author's maternal grandfather was a rich lawyer who had fallen foul of Goebbels in the early 20s by representing a French general who sued Goebbels for libel when Goebbels accused him of having caused his limp by torturing him as a prisoner. The author's grandfather won the General's case by proving that Goebbels had been born with a club-foot and had been exempted from military service because of it. When the Nazis came to power, the grandfather was beaten severely and spent some time in a concentration camp. Not only had Goebbels not forgotten, but the grandfather was of part Jewish descent though he was not Jewish.

He and the author's father, then a boy, fled to France. The boy became as French as he was German; he also decided to be a communist, on the not uncommon but nonetheless erroneous view that one's enemy's enemy is one's friend. (This was well before the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.) When war came, the author's father fled to the unoccupied zone and joined the resistance, to whom, as bilingual in German and French, he was extremely useful, and in whose service he was extremely brave. The account of his life in the resistance reads so excitingly that it is difficult to believe that it is true: but it is. Having survived – just – it would have been difficult for the rest of his life not to have been an anti-climax.

In addition, he had by then become a dogmatic communist – like the other members of the resistance with whom he had fought. Eventually he returned to East Germany and led a

privileged existence as a journalist and spy for the regime, though he had his secret reservations. He passed on his communist convictions to his daughter, the author's mother, who found it increasingly difficult to reconcile them with the reality around her, but remained fundamentally loyal to the regime until five minutes to midnight.

The author's paternal grandfather, whom he did not get to know until late in his life (he had deserted the author's grandmother before he was born), became a loyal supporter of the regime by a different route. An enthusiastic Nazi and soldier until a week before the surrender, he found a new cause in the German Democratic Republic as a teacher and headmaster, and prospered, at least by local standards. According to the author, he would have been a convinced believer in any system under which he happened to find himself: and perhaps most of mankind is like that.

His son, with whom he had no contact, was a loyal rebel, if I may so put it. He was an artist leading a mildly double life: as the Stasi file on him put it, he was questioning of the regime but not hostile to it. When the destruction of the Wall came he was disorientated: he felt he had nothing any longer to be *against*, none of his little gestures counted for anything. He became insignificant, therefore, and rather movingly made a decision not to join in the unleashed scramble for material goods, preferring to live as if in Van Gogh's bedroom, with a char, a table and a bedstead, and nothing else.

The author conveys very well the mental contortions required to live in East Germany (or in any such regime): the mixture of belief, cynicism, indifference, calculation, compromise, wilful ignorance, opportunism, bravery, effrontery and all the many shades and interactions between them. The author does not make himself out a hero, quite the reverse: he is an ordinary, intelligent likeable person who just wants a 'normal' life and would prefer to live without overt political interference.

The moral reprehensibility and degradation of the regime was obvious both from the outside and in retrospect: but from within and at the time, matters were often more equivocal. Perhaps the hardest words in the book are reserved for those in the west who admired the GDR – different from the attitude of François Mauriac, who famously said that he liked Germany so much that he was glad there were two of them. In 1987, when it still looked as if the GDR might last for ever, the author's maternal grandfather, taking advantage of his political position, took the author on a trip to France, an enormous privilege for that time and from that place. Together, they visited political allies in France, mainly rich intellectuals. Having lunch in the luxurious villa in the South of France of one of those intellectuals, the young Maxim wonders 'How you can sit in a villa like that and rave about the GDR?' He then says, 'I reflect that

it’s a very pleasant business, being a revolutionary in the South of France.’

The previous owner of the book has marked these two sentences with a green pen, the only ones he had so marked. Obviously he thought they were of particular significance: I think he was right. No one is as self-destructive in the name of generosity of spirit as the fortunate man.

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