

Arthur Stupay
Report on Keith Gessen, My Terrible Country
Novel Club of Cleveland

April 15, 2020

This is both an easy book and one complicated by the author's biography just discussed by Diane Stupay. Is the book that I will analyze an autobiography, which is not our mandate, or some variation, a new category: semi-autobiography, with the hero encountering his birthplace.

This review should have been given to Leon Gabinet, who knows more about displacement and resettlement than anyone I know. How would he approach this strange combination of autobiography, some fiction, some travelogue, as well as the machinations of the academy. He also played hockey. In this connection, I should mention a book on a trip to Moscow sponsored by the Jewish Federation of Cleveland in October 1988, in which Toby and Jay Siegel participated. On it, they interacted with Russians being helped by the Federation.

My job tonight is to find a way through this delightful mess, which is part travelogue as well.

The hero, Andrei, deals with universal issues: coming to grips with your homeland, discrimination, ethnicity, national culture, original and adopted, history of the people and land. I can see each of us discussing this material in different ways, since we or our parents and grandparents were all immigrants at one time or another, and some even returned to their birth country.

For instance, I have an interest in Polish culture, especially since the end of WW II, but also earlier. I have been to Warsaw a few times and can find my way around town. I would hope that my grandma would live close to the park, the Royal Park, but also close to Old Town, about two miles from the Vistula River. I could talk about my favorite Hungarian restaurant, meeting locals who like Hungarian wine. I was also a devotee of tennis and would look for tennis courts and eventually a group to play with, like Andrei Kaplan did with ice hockey. But I would have named him somewhat differently, with a more Russian sounding name like Chemyshevsky, Merislavovits, or possibly Goncharov.

Since I am fortunate, as many are here, married to a likeminded woman, also interested in novels, I could find some other distraction than to seek some local

romance as Andrei did. I would also look for a coffee shop, maybe a local equivalent of Starbucks, and get to know my grandma's friends, if any were alive, and search out history-rich neighborhoods. But in the case of Warsaw and not Moscow, it was flattened, not a single structure on the western side of the Vistula survived, not the Royal Palace, not the main Cathedral, not the university, nothing. It was all rubble, after the Nazis withdrew.

But this is a story each of you could write about returning to your grandma in Ireland, France, Iran, Israel, India or China, or any of the other 180 plus national cultures. This assumes you or one of your parents and grandparents were forced from their birth country. Indeed, you don't have to go overseas, it could be set in Mississippi, Brooklyn or Lorain, or my childhood neighborhood, 54th Street in Manhattan. But could you weave a narrative that holds the reader, with one action or other? At times for me, it was a slog, but with a marvelous end.

And what a narrative! What nice easy sentences. What pleasant dialogue. No mass killings, murders, political intrigue, no great family disputes, no Holocaust history, no cold war intrigues. It is easy to follow.

Like his Tour of the Neighborhood, chapter 3. He reflected on an earlier trip. Then, he encountered "ruined buildings ruined streets and ruined people". But now, presumably, 2008-9, he mentions the main street near his grandmother, Sretenka, "It was cute, European sort of street, narrower than most, with travel agencies and restaurants and bars, an experimental theater, a Hugo Boss store and a shitty bookstore..." This could be anywhere. He continues, "Nowadays, even in the morning, there were gleaming black foreign cars, a nicely dressed man or woman, speaking on a seek mobile phone. This was not the Russia I remembered. I also found several European style cafes with small tables and little signs that said Wi Fi."

Yet, it was near Lubyanka Square, the headquarters of the old KGB, now the FSB. It was also near the Kremlin and the close by RussOil, the oil giant and near-oil monopoly. Yes, the RussOil of Kremlin Oligarch fame.

He also uses the subway, the one built in the Stalin era. He noted that "The stations were glorious, laid out in marble and decorated in colorful mosaics".

Then he tries to make friends, Chapter 5. He gets reacquainted with Emma Abramovna, his grandmother's old friend. Then there is the scene with his brother's tenants in the apartment next door, expats from the US, called the "The

Soldiers”, maybe a mishearing of subletters, but his relationship with them is purely commercial’ he is collecting rent for his brother. Throughout the book there are clever snippets of conversation. One he overhears, in the chapter titled, Life is for Living, is spoken by one of the hockey players. “Look at Putin. Or Berlusconi. He is an old man. He has unlimited power over his country. And still chasing girls.” Etc, etc, etc. In his hockey group, there is this interchange, about supposed liberals who play hockey with them, he says: “The Russian liberals who opposed the Putin regime, hated Russia. They sort of lived here, but they also lived sort of elsewhere. None of them watched Russian TV...they seemed to like only the hyperviolent ones like the Cheaters.”

In a later episode, after meeting his girlfriend, Yulia, he ponders about how much he really knows about Russia, even now during his visit. He reflected on this after the hockey game: “Everybody in Moscow seemed to drive an Audi, and there are websites where you could order a prostitute after reading all her customer reviews. Outside of a few Soviet era groceries, food was expensive, rent was outrageous and hockey games were closed to outsiders...So this was the Putinist bargain: you gave up your freedoms, I make you rich, but not enough people were satisfied”. He concluded, “If they liked their Putin, they could have him

There is also the incident of Baba Seva, that is grandmother Seva Efraimovna Gekhtman, getting injured in a fall down the stairs in her apartment after a walk to the store on a very cold and snowy evening. It sets in motion more travel within Moscow and we learn bit about hospital emergency care in a socialist society, such as no extended check-in or review of insurance.

I particularly liked the part where Andrei speaks at Yulia’s invitation at the Falanster bookstore, in Chapter 4, dealing with the American situation, “about professors and adjuncts and the job market”, just before their goalie Sergei Ivanov was invited to speak about contemporary education in Russia. Andrei could not refuse, since he was attracted to Yulia. As he said, his main complaint was the difference between the pay of full-time professors and the adjuncts paid by class, concluding there was “No justification for such a huge disparity, especially in institutions that considered themselves models of democracy and liberalism”. Sergei, the goalie, spoke, later jailed for supposed radicalism and resisting arrest, about his view of the education and political situation in Russia. After a long discourse on politics, violence of the recent past, he concluded, “The Administration (Russian) adopts more of the lingo and practices of big

business...Putin was a reformer, just as people said, but that, as the pessimists had said, he was adopting Soviet methods of political repression, control of the press” and so on. He concludes, “This is what capitalism looks like on the margins of the system.” Apropos, in today’s New York Times column by Michelle Goldberg, entitled, That Biden Accusation, she noted that Biden’s accuser of so-called sexual abuse, wrote on-line posting, “President Putin has an alluring combination of strength and gentleness. His sensuous image projects his love of life, the embodiment of grace while facing adversity.” This should be a book about her rather than Andrei.

How different is this story from our previous book by Amos Oz, Elsewhere, PERHAPS, reviewed by Leon last month? This was also a story about getting to know the people in Israel, escaping hatred. It might be noted that the kibbutz movement started in Russia a century earlier. The kibbutz was not a city but a socialist farming community, not in the middle of a world-famous place like Moscow.

There were interpersonal problems on the Kibbutz as well as in the middle of Moscow. Strange love affairs in both places, desperate people trying to survive. Is there is a big difference between Siegfried Bergman, the German-Israeli uncle, who has come to take the pregnant heroine back to her mother, who herself abandoned her family, and Andrei? Andrei also left his American family, possibly settling in Mother Russia, dealing with his own failures and inadequacies.

But in the end, our Andryush, comes out alright. He is offered a much-sought after job at a major university in the States, after losing one elsewhere.

But this was after a run in with the Moscow police at the protest at RussOil in central Moscow. As you may remember, it was a protest over the plight of their workers, but this was dangerous, since union organizers at RussOil were jailed earlier. After being interrogated about the protest, noting that the other protesters were run-of the mill social democrats, they let him go. Later, Sergei and Misha, his hockey mates and protest organizers, were arrested, charged with extremism and promoting social unrest; they each got three years in a Russian prison.

In the heart-warming ending, the story noted that there were articles in the western press about an American academic arrested by the regime. It was even on Facebook, making it seem that our hero was a martyr. He gets the prize of possible tenure, a large travel budget, plus an apartment. Nirvana, living happily ever after.

Questions, Gessen's book

1. Is this autobiography or some variant? Were you bothered about the connection between Gessen's life and his so-called fictional story?
2. Is this a tale worth retelling? What else should he have included. Should there have been more about his life after he returned to the U.S.?
3. Would you be drawn to visit Russia now? Would you be deterred by the Putin dictatorship?
4. There is genuine poverty in Russia, with low wages and limited choice of many goods, including housing. Do these issues matter if the culture is rich and thriving? Do you get a better understanding of current challenges in Russian life?
5. What do you think of the ending? Does the ending seem contrived, too glib? How would you compare and contrast Russian life with American life now? Are there some ways in which the Russians have it better? At least, you know where Putin stands on key issues, making politics a minor issue.