

PERESTROIKA UP CLOSE

by Robert Rand

Eight months in the Soviet capital left me convinced that *perestroika*, Gorbachev's "restructuring" of the Soviet economy, remains a phantom. It has not yet touched the average Russian. If a political rival to Gorbachev were to look his countrymen square in the eye and ask, as Ronald Reagan once did in a somewhat different context, "Are you better off now than you were three years ago?", the answer would be a reverberating "No."

Perestroika is, as Soviet citizens themselves like to say, "*vsyo na bumage*"—all on paper. They can read about it in newspapers or follow its purported course on television (a show called "The Projector of Perestroika" is a popular evening's entertainment on Moscow's Channel One), but the plain truth is that they can't reach out and touch it. Its absence, in the presence of promises to the contrary, makes perestroika, in the view of many Muscovites, yet another in a long series of empty political slogans promulgated from on high. "It's a meatless bone tossed out to a hungry dog," said one acquaintance, whose Party membership card did not preclude editorial comments about perestroika's shortcomings.

The failure of perestroika jumps out and touches the Moscow resident day in and day out like a persistent itch that won't go away. The more *Moskvichi* scratch and claw in frustration at the bankruptcy of it all, the more irritated they become.

Take the Moscow telephone system. Perestroika hasn't affected that. My resentment toward the slogans of perestroika, in fact, first began to fester after an abortive

attempt to telephone an acquaintance from a public phone booth (called an *avtomat*, a contradiction in terms). Lifting a Soviet handset and dialing a number is no guarantee you'll actually be able to telecommunicate. Several factors must coalesce. The rotary dial—there are no push button phones—must be tightly screwed in to ensure smooth, bump-free dialing. The coin slot (a phone call costs two kopecks, or about three cents) must be in proper working order, ready to gulp down the inserted coin at the right moment: a premature gulp in mid-dialing means you've been had. And, if you pass these two hurdles without incident, the phone lines mustn't cross: in Moscow there is an even chance that a correctly dialed number nonetheless may rouse the wrong party. Finally, if you have managed to reach the intended recipient of your call, there is the question of audibility. Telecommunication often means shouting into the receiver in order to be heard or straining to catch the reply.

Do this exercise for a few months (or years, as Soviet telephone users must) and see if you don't develop an inclination to question perestroika. Arguably, a modern economic giant runs on its telephones. The Soviet Union is still crawling.

Take food shopping, that perennial bugaboo of Soviet life. Perestroika will not succeed unless the Soviet Union's grocery shelves can be kept well-stocked: Gorbachev himself would acknowledge that. But 70 years after the revolution, purchasing the nutritional necessities of life in the Soviet capital remains no easy task. Citizens routinely carry *pakety*, or plastic sacks, like

sidearms, always at hand to bag that prized item they may come upon unexpectedly during commutes through the city.

During my tenure in Moscow, state stores simply did not have reliable supplies of fruits, vegetables, meats, milk products, and other commodities. Sugar, for instance, vanished from the Soviet capital last spring; it was said to be hoarded by moonshiners who needed the stuff to make home-brewed vodka. Sales of officially sanctioned liquor were revived as part of Gorbachev's anti-alcoholism campaign. Cheese—real cheese, that is—was also among the items intermittently out of reach. "Cheese of Friendship," however, a processed product wrapped in silvery foil and resembling Cheezwhiz in taste and in texture, was always available at the local cheese store.

Salad makings were hard to come by. Cucumbers, for some reason, were always around town. Tomatoes were coquettish in their availability, and green peppers were downright flirtatious, unpredictably appearing in this store or that.

I was surprised to find that mushrooms, the stuff of Stroganoff sauce and other Slavic delights, were almost impossible to find. Their arrival one day last spring in my neighborhood food store immediately generated a line of buyers. I queued up, *paket* at the ready, only to be informed once I reached the head of the line after a ten-minute wait: "I'm sorry, comrade, it's time for our lunch break and we'll resume selling mushrooms in one hour's time."

The supply of fruit was equally unpredictable. Apples (from Hungary) and oranges (from Egypt) appeared from time to time, but never simultaneously. Citrus

juices (from Cuba) made a nice fresh fruit alternative, but you never knew when they would appear. Bananas (from where I do not know) were once reported to be on sale near Moscow State University, that towering monument-to-Stalin on the banks of the Moscow River that I called home. By the time I tracked that rumor down not even the peels remained.

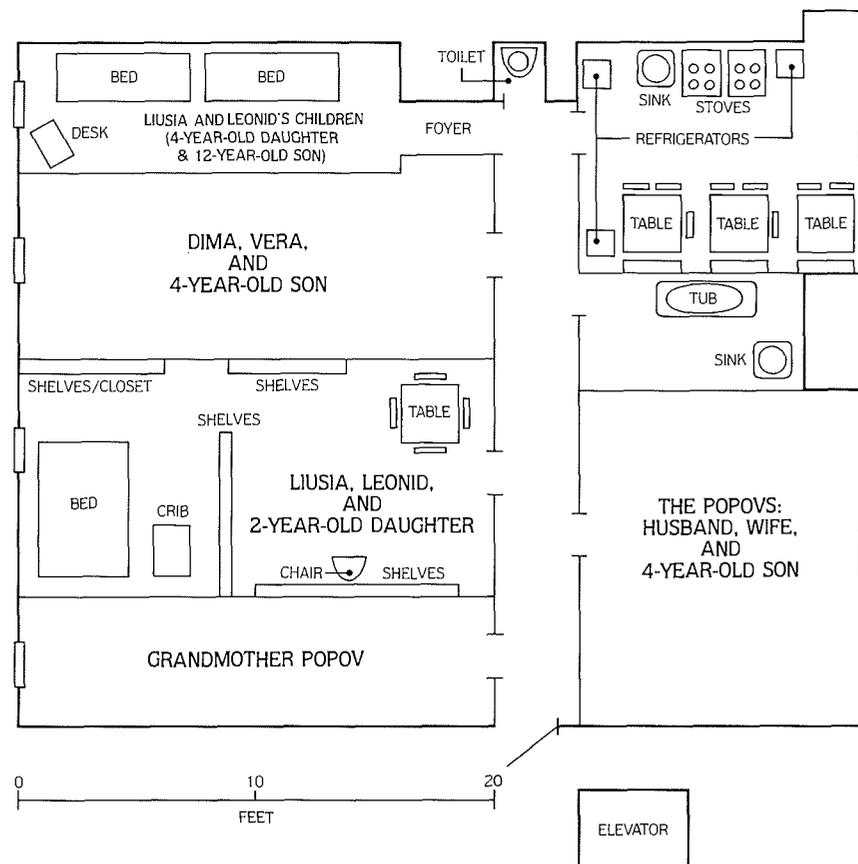
The Moscow resident develops a genuine appreciation for the fraternal socialist countries when it comes to food shopping. The smaller Warsaw Pact nations may be militarily dependent on the Kremlin, but in appeal to the palate, perestroika can't match what the East Europeans have to offer. Bulgarian ketchup (as good as Heinz—Soviets use it as spaghetti sauce) and Hungarian vegetables, compotes, and yams (all in jars with reuseable lids, a bit of modern technology that still eludes Soviet manufacturers) are snatched up as soon as they reach the markets. So are frozen brussels sprouts, carrots and peas from Poland, when available.

Frozen vegetables are sold, albeit intermittently, in plastic bags at selected ice cream stands. It took me three months to discover that.

Soviet consumers, by the way, *can* find a wide selection of fruits, vegetables and meats at the handful of farmer's markets located throughout Moscow. But the prices, which the merchants set themselves, are steep, beyond the range of most people. I spent eight rubles (over 12 dollars) one winter day for four apples.

Perestroika has not impressed Dima. Or Leonid. Or Vera or Liusia. Or of any of the twelve residents who live in the fifth floor apartment at the southern tip of Moscow's

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Baumansky region near the Kremlin.

Home for these middle-class folks is a *kommunalka*, or communal apartment, a cramped living space whose very existence—20 percent of the USSR's urban population lives in them—makes clear that housing ranks high on the long list of “deficit items” in the Soviet Union.

The Baumansky *kommunalka* is a five bedroom, one kitchen, one bathroom affair (no a/c, w/d). It houses three unrelated family units (or four, if you consider the family of mice in the kitchen.) The bedrooms, which double as living rooms, branch off from both sides of a long, partially lit hallway. The layout:

- Dima, a scientist, and his wife Vera, both around thirty, live in one bedroom with their four-year-old son. When I last saw them, they were expecting the birth of

a second child—but not the receipt of expanded living quarters.

- Leonid, a freelance journalist, and his wife Liusia, both in their mid-thirties, occupy two rooms: they sleep in one with their two-year-old daughter, while the other has beds for a second daughter, age 4, and a 12-year-old son.

- A third family, the Popovs—husband, wife, four-year-old son, and grandmother—occupies the remaining two bedrooms.

The rooms vary in size. Leonid and Liusia's bedroom is approximately 20' x 10'. A bookcase splits the room in half, with bed and crib on one side and dining room table on the other. Their daughter and son are in cramped quarters, large enough to hold two child-size single beds, but not much more.

All 12 people share the austere bathroom (one toilet, one sink, one bathtub) and kitchen facilities; three miniature refrigerators (called "Frosties") and two four-burner gas stoves provide a bit of flexibility.

Dima, Vera, Leonid, and Liusia spend most evenings holding court around the rickety wooden kitchen table, downing cup after cup of boiling hot tea, nibbling on sweets that Liusia, an accomplished cook, has prepared. They swat at cockroaches (not in short supply) and discuss the course of current Soviet life. The other adult residents of the *kommunalka*, the Popovs, do not join them, pointedly shunning communal activities as a result of a still unhealed quarrel that took place last year over who-was-supposed-to-pay-what-share of an electric bill. Estrangement between *kommunalka* cohabitants is not uncommon.

The kitchen gatherings, which are duplicated each evening in countless other Moscow households, have the air of a judicial hearing whose participants are simultaneously lawyer, judge, witness, and jury: presenting, probing, arguing, and evaluating evidence drawn from each day's experiences in an effort to sort out what Gorbachev's reform movement really means. The criteria are personal and straightforward: Gorbachev's policies are measured on the basis of whether one's living conditions have improved. At the Baumansky *kommunalka* they have not. Perestroika, the apartment residents say, has passed them by.

"I think things are as bad or actually worse than before," said Liusia. Her bill of particulars one day late last spring began with a report on Soviet plumbing.

"We haven't had hot water for a month," she said. She explained that each year, in late May or June, the pipes providing Moscow's nine million residents with hot running water are cleaned and repaired. To do the job, the plumbing authori-

ties simply turn off the tap, one city region at a time. "I haven't bathed in days" Liusia said; she lacked the courage to face, after four weeks, another tub full of cold water.

(My dormitory bathroom at Moscow University went without hot water for 22 days beginning June 1. My frustration intensified during that period, but I learned, while taking icy showers, to stifle my screams so as not to draw attention.)

"Food is harder to come by," Liusia continued. "The shops are as poorly stocked as ever." She said she fills her days under Gorbachev as she did in the days preceding perestroika: she forages, shuffling from one food store to another, all in search of the supplies she needs to prepare meals for her family of five.

As a mother of three, Liusia is the beneficiary of certain privileges available to "many-child mothers" in the Soviet Union. Women with three or more offspring are given the right to purchase certain commodities, notably meat, without waiting in line, and are entitled to preference in obtaining scarce durable goods, such as household appliances. Liusia complains that the chronic shortages make the privileges illusory, and that perestroika, for her, will exist only when this illusion becomes reality.

"We've been on a priority waiting list to buy a washing machine for over a year now," Liusia said. Meanwhile, her family's laundry is done by hand and hung out to dry on clotheslines that fill the kitchen's upper reaches.

A major recent event in Liusia's life centered on the receipt of another deficit item: a handheld electric mixmaster. The *mikser*, as it's called in Russian, was made in West Germany and purchased by a foreign visitor at one of the *beryozki*, or hard currency stores, that are off limits to the average Soviet citizen. "Vera, come look!" Liusia

squealed after receiving the item. "A *mikser*! What a gift! Now I won't have to break my arms any more, and think of all the time I'll save!" She cradled the blender like a new-born baby, and took turns with Vera punching its on-off button, gleefully watching the machine's attachments whiz and whir.

"Is she pleased with the gift?" Leonid was asked.

"More than pleased," he said. "She's enchanted."

Enchanted is not the word Dima would use to describe his view of life in the Baumansky *kommunalka*. With a new baby on the horizon, he and Vera are dissatisfied with their one room. Gorbachev's stated goal of providing every Soviet family with its own apartment by the end of the century means little to Dima; he and Vera need more space now.

They have thought about trying to move into larger quarters. But a rigid set of Soviet rules and practices restricts the number of people eligible for new housing. Eligibility hinges on the number of square meters of living space an individual occupies: if you live in Moscow and you enjoy more than approximately eleven square meters of living space (about 120 square feet: the size of a 10' x 12' room), the state will not assign you a larger apartment. Even if you meet the eligibility requirements, as Dima's family will once their new child is born, a wait of two, three, four years lies ahead before new accommodations become available. Other avenues exist to obtain better housing quicker, but these often require a layout of large sums of money for bribes and black market payments to circumvent the system. Such illegal "speculation" is widespread; Dima, due to scruples or lack of funds, chose not to dabble in it.

Dima was seemingly without recourse. Until, that is, he realized that the only way to see perestroika was to build it himself.

And that's exactly what he did. With hammer, nails, and a bundle of two-by-fours, Dima restructured his living quarters. What was once a plain, one-level *kommunalka* living space became a fashionable two-level flat with loft. High ceilings made the project, whose legality is open to question, possible. Thanks to Dima, but not to Gorbachev, perestroika now lives in the Baumansky communal flat.

Across town, ask Marina about the fruits of perestroika and you'll get a sigh. A shake of the head. A flash of anger. Marina is the 84-year-old matriarch of a family that has tried but failed to improve its quality of life through perestroika.

Marina and her husband have their own one-bedroom apartment in the southwest section of Moscow. Her daughter, Tanya, son-in-law Sergei, and two grandsons live on the other side of town in a one-bedroom place that Marina's mother once occupied. The family, like most that I encountered in Moscow, is tightly knit, almost interdependent. It's all for one and one for all in a common struggle to survive the vagaries of Soviet life.

Perestroika provided Marina's clan with an opportunity to get ahead. In 1986, at Gorbachev's direction, the Soviet legislature passed a law that allowed citizens to operate what are essentially private business enterprises, called "cooperatives," in their free time. The premise behind the law was simple: labor productivity and the output of high quality goods and services were likely to rise when workers ran their own shops and shared in the business's profits. Cooperatives, which would coexist with state-run enterprises, were meant to benefit the worker (called a *kooperator*) and consumer alike.

Some 48,000 cooperative enterprises now exist in Gorbachev's Russia. More than 3,000 of them are in Moscow. They include

restaurants, flower shops, clothing boutiques, bakeries, repair services, and other enterprises. They are managed without state interference: the cooperative directors determine the prices charged for the enterprise's product. The prices are higher than those in state-run businesses. But the item or service purchased is usually superior to that available in government shops.

Some Soviet consumers, those who can afford to pay, have benefited from this aspect of perestroika. A citizen willing to part with forty rubles (about \$64 at the official exchange rate) to buy dinner for two at "Kropotkinskaia 36," Mos-

cow's best known cooperative restaurant, will go home a satisfied customer, the recipient of attentive service and first-rate food, amenities not available at cheaper state-operated feeding places.

But most Muscovites I met stayed away from the cooperatives. They were simply too expensive. That 40-ruble dinner tab equals nearly one-quarter of the average worker's monthly wage. Forty-ruble T-shirts with Western-style logos on them, or blue jeans with 110 ruble (\$178) price tags, all on sale at one clothing cooperative I visited, are also inaccessible. A sizeable number of Soviets hold cooperatives in contempt and view *kooperatory* as bandits



Last September, Muscovites lined up with their sacks to buy melons on Kalinin Prospekt, one of the Soviet capital's major streets. It was the best month for fresh fruit.

intent on gouging the comrades for all they're worth. For the common man or woman who cannot afford the high prices, cooperatives, and perestroika, are for the privileged, not for the masses.

But almost everyone can afford 10 kopecks (\$0.16). That's what it costs to visit one of the cooperative public toilets that have sprung up in Moscow. In this service industry, Sergei, Marina's 33-year-old son-in-law, a man of ambition and business acumen, saw a limitless market and sensed an opportunity.

The pay-as-you-go concept is certainly alien to Soviet culture. Not, strictly speaking, the kind of revolutionary idea Lenin had in mind when he ushered in the Communist era. But the pedestrian heeding nature's call is treated to an uncommonly antiseptic experience, all for a nominal fee.

Out of curiosity one day last winter, I dropped by one of the facilities, located in the Paveletsky train station in central Moscow. The station, originally constructed under Tsar Nicholas II in 1900 and renovated in 1980, is a cavernous, rectangular building with a flowery, art nouveau facade; its trains connect Moscow with towns on the middle and lower regions of the Volga River. A 1920s movie scene: old, weary faces and stocky peasant bodies. Many travelers are loaded down with cheap suitcases and bulky burlap sacks. These folk are the villagers and farmers who, from hundreds of miles away, regularly visit the capital to purchase food, clothing and other goods that are not available elsewhere. Moscow may suffer shortages of consumer items, but it is a cornucopia for those who transit Paveletsky.

The travelers had their choice of two separate cooperative bathrooms in the station when I saw them. Both were tidy and well maintained. One had Soviet muzak piped in. Two bewildered men were seen exiting that facility with wide grins on their

faces. "Music! Can you believe it?" said one. "It's like being in Paris!"

The other bathroom, located nearby, was not audio equipped. But the walls were nicely tiled and there were automatic hand-dryers next to the sinks (the hand-dryers didn't work, but the thought was nice). The urinals in the place shone. "My god," said a wide-eyed elderly man as he entered the bathroom after depositing a 10-kopeck coin in a wooden box, "those things are as smooth and bright as eggshells!"

Sergei entered the cooperative public bathroom business at the invitation of a friend who operated the Paveletsky facility. Sergei cleaned toilets. It was unpleasant work that demanded virtually all of his free time. Marina and Tanya, while cheering Sergei on, were embarrassed by what he was doing and kept his activities secret from family acquaintances.

Sergei's toil soon began to pay off. Sharing in the proceeds, he was bringing in money, more money, he said, than he had ever earned as a teacher, his official profession. He had cashed in on perestroika.

Nevertheless, Sergei and his family weren't pleased. Perestroika gave them a burgeoning bank account. But one can't buy what doesn't exist. In effect, the chronic shortage of consumer goods left his new assets frozen. Financially, Sergei was all dressed up with no place to go.

What Sergei wanted most was a car. Wheels. Something to ease the burden of life a bit. Money wasn't at issue. He could afford the 10,000 rubles (\$16,000) it would cost to buy a new Soviet-made (the only option) model—a Moskvich or Zhiguli. No problem. But automobiles were not to be found. Adding his name to the official waiting list to purchase a car was out of the question, he said, because delivery would be ten or more years down the road.

Sergei was not a patient man. He decided to try the black market in autos, where private vendors sell vehicles with pricetags that exceed official levels. But, when I last saw him, he had come up empty-handed. Marina and Tanya got into the act by concocting a scheme: Marina's brother, who lives in Washington, would purchase a Soviet-built car in the United States and then have it shipped to Sergei in Moscow. They were disappointed to learn that Soviet-built cars haven't flooded the American market.

The whole episode angered Marina, who seemed to take personal offense at perestroika's inability to satisfy the family's consumer expectations. She was upset because her son-in-law's hard work could not be converted into something tangible. "We don't want for money," she said bitterly. They lacked a change in their daily lives, the kind of change that Gorbachev had yet to deliver.

Yet Gorbachev has delivered one thing that makes perestroika's shortcomings easier for the Soviet citizen to endure, and that's *glasnost*, popularly defined as "openness." Soviet newspaper readers and television viewers—the *glasnost* consumer—have been bombarded by tales of social ills, official corruption and economic maladministration. These revelations have shaken old notions of public information and debate. They have been bolts of electric shock therapy, leaving the public with blinking eyes, variously astounded, confused, pleased, and angered at the latest revelation, and always thirsting for more. Hardly a week went by during my stay in Moscow without the Soviet media exposing the scandalous behavior of some government bureaucrat or Party official. The goal of such publicity—"publicity" is in fact the

real meaning of *glasnost*—was, by force of example and threat of accountability, to stamp out mismanagement and arbitrariness as distinctive features of Soviet life. *Glasnost* is, in this sense, the cutting edge of perestroika; the "sharp weapon of restructuring," as a recent Communist Party decree declared, designed to soften up the thick barriers to Gorbachev's reforms.

Glasnost has energized those late night kitchen table discussions, giving Dima, Vera, Leonid, Liusia, and millions of others more grist for debate than they ever imagined possible. Soviets have always grumbled about the system's self-inflicted difficulties. But in the "epoch of non-*glasnost*," as one of the Baumansky apartment dwellers called the pre-Gorbachev era, they did so quietly, resignedly, without hope. Now, thanks to *glasnost*, it's not only permissible to criticize, but you can, within limits, do so publicly. There are even radio call-in shows that air citizen's complaints about the system's shortcomings.

Those grave shortcomings, of course, still exist. *Glasnost* alone will not restructure the Soviet Union. Openness has not put meat, fruits and vegetables on the grocery shelves. Life remains, under perestroika as before, a struggle beyond the ken of most Americans. Some Soviets claim that things are even worse. But at least the citizenry has the satisfaction of knowing that rose-colored glasses are less likely now than at any time since 1917 to shade the Kremlin's version of the truth. Optimism, not indifference, infuses those kitchen discussions; a country whose leaders are prepared to acknowledge that problems exist is a country that at least has a chance of solving some of them.

As Marina put it: "Life has become more difficult, but at least we can breathe easier."