

Three Days to Freedom

A Moscow native—now a Las Vegas—remembers the heady days 20 years ago when her country swept communism into the dustbin

BY SVETLANA LARIONOVA MILLER

Like you, I live in Las Vegas. My son was born here, and my husband grew up here. I've come to love this city—the mountains, the big sky, the spectacular August sunsets. I consider it my city. But 20 years ago, I lived in a different country, and, it often seems, an entirely different world. And—like anyone living in Moscow, Russia, back then—I can pinpoint the exact day when it all changed forever.

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The sounds on the morning of Aug. 19, 1991, were the same as every other morning: The clanking of the empty bottles from the supermarket below my apartment, the voices of people standing in line to turn in the bottles for cash, the barking dogs, the traffic on Pleshcheeva Street. I had nowhere to rush: I'd just quit my translator's job at a stifling Soviet establishment, and I was looking forward to working somewhere more progressive, maybe in one of the Western companies that were opening offices in Moscow. But I wasn't in too much of a hurry: I was in my 20s, and I wanted to enjoy what was left of summer.

My mom was in the kitchen, humming, making tea. I turned on the TV, but instead of the usual chipper commentator on the morning news, there was an episode from *Swan Lake*. I switched channels: *Swan Lake*. I switched again: *Swan Lake*. This was not a good sign. "Mom!" I called. "What the heck is going on?" Now there was a still shot of birches, set to solemn music. It smacked of the old times. After six years of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika and glasnost, we'd gotten used to something like free media. We already had outspoken, controversial programs: America had *60 Minutes*; we had *600 Seconds*. The country was on its way to hard-earned democracy, and change was felt everywhere: in culture, in politics, in the very air we breathed. Books and films that had been banned for decades were coming out. Boris Yeltsin had just been elected president of the Russian Republic in an unprecedented democratic election.

A commentator in a black turtleneck appeared onscreen and announced that new leadership, which called itself the State Committee for the State of Emergency, had taken over the Soviet Union to prevent "chaos and anarchy."

Gorbachev, we were told, had taken ill and could not perform his presidential duties. The committee represented the KGB, the interior minister, the army. Gennadi Yanaev, a vice president, gave it an appearance of legality.

So, the worst had happened: the return to communism. "Back to *siski masiski*," Mom sighed. That was a joke back when Leonid Brezhnev, who ruled forever, was slurring his words. He loved to say *sistematicheski* (systematically), but what came out was: *siski masiski* (boobies-moobies). Or, here is a better one: *Sosiski sranye* (crappy hotdogs) instead of *sotsialisticheskie strany* (socialist countries).

Mom and I were curious what our newspaper was saying, but the paper didn't come that day. It was apparently too radical and had been banned. We went out into the city. There were tanks in the streets, rolling into the heart of Moscow. Some folks shook their fists at the tanks; some tried to run across the street in front of them. At Pushkin Square, we hurried past a meeting of the fascist group *Pamyat*. We tried not to look at the swastikas. The fascists seemed agitated.

Mom saw a line coming out of a store called Crystal and Glass, so she took her place in the queue. (When Muscovites see a line, they are powerless not to stand in it.) The people were agitated. "Do they want to overthrow Gorbachev?" "Do you know what the line is for?" "They're afraid that there might be an inspection, so they put the good stuff on sale." Luckily, the line moved pretty fast, and soon my mom saw what was for sale: delightful sets of glass dessert plates. She bought four sets: for herself, for her sister, for her friend and another just in case.

I took the metro toward my friend Morozov's house. An old man in crumpled clothes, slightly swaying, kept saying: "The civil war is coming. Just wait and see, it's coming. There will be blood." At one station, a fistfight broke out.

At Morozov's house, there was a miniature war going on between him and his father, an old communist named Nikolai. "Maybe now there'll be order!" said Nikolai. "It's high time Gorbachev is stopped from letting the great Union fall apart." We argued with him till our throats hurt. The old

man looked smug and hopeful; we felt like we had woken into a nightmare.

Morozov's friend Igor came in, kicked off his shoes and said, loudly and cheerfully, "Those commies, they just can't let go, can they?" Nikolai, the commie, poked his silver head into the hallway: "Hello," he half-coughed, and disappeared, shutting the door behind him.

We waited for the evening news and the first press conference given by the Emergency Committee. They appeared on the screen, five of them. They were holding Gorbachev under arrest in Crimea. Yanaev spoke on behalf of the others, inviting us to return to the days of Brezhnev. His voice rang with authority. Nikolai was thrilled. "Everything they say makes perfect sense," he said, looking at us, hoping to see some flicker of agreement. There was none. Could it really have all been in vain? All those years of glasnost—of hope and expectation?

Just then the camera focused on Yanaev's hands. They were shaking uncontrollably. Morozov's mom, Nina, a country woman with a mind of her own, laughed: "Look! The hands are trembling on the chicken thief!" We saw it, too. And we laughed. Suddenly everything seemed absurd and circus-like. They could issue any declaration they want, but that camera showing Yanaev's shaking hands was clearly held by someone who was rebelling against it all.

A young journalist stood up to ask a question: "Could you please say if you understand that last night you carried out a coup d'état?" She looked straight into Yanaev's eyes. She was defiant and fearless. The TV journalists were having their own coup against the coup. In those fateful days, people were glued to their screens, watching democracy's defenders build barricades and Yeltsin speak from atop a tank that had taken the democrats' side. His towering figure and booming voice inspired hope. We saw kids climbing the tanks, the soldiers smiling and accepting food from old ladies. We mourned the three young men killed by forces loyal to the Emergency Committee. We saw flowers tucked into guns.

The coup lasted three days. Moscow had rallied behind Yeltsin. On Aug. 21, the members of the Emergency Committee were arrested. Gorbachev returned from the Crimea. One world had ended, and another beckoned with endless hope and mystery. ♣

