

The recent bizarre poisonings of Putin-dissenters brought to mind my life in London in the early 1960's and my brush with Soviet spies. I lived near Highgate cemetery where the main polonium-laced dissenter was interred, just a Molotov-cocktail's throw from the imposing grave of Karl Marx.

At the age of eleven, I knew little of global matters, but one day they came right by my front door. Playing with friends in our maisonette's front yard, I was startled by the dramatic appearance of many large, black, soviet Zil limousines turning onto our street. All of their bulbous front fenders were sporting a small fluttering red flag bearing a yellow hammer-and-sickle motif. A flatulent posse of police motorbikes caught up with my ears. With closed black windows, the cars sped smoothly past my gaping mouth.

Having recently moved into the flats I didn't know what was happening. William, my next door neighbor, apparently a veteran of this ominous spectacle, leapt into action and shouted "Let's go!" He and three other boys raced out of the yard and into the street following the cars. I ran after them, not knowing why or what our fate would be at the end of our adventure.

The narrow road and the amount of traffic caused the caravan to slow, so we gained some ground. Between gulps of air, as we raced up the hill I asked what was happening.

William snorted "It's bound to be sum big Russki commie leader."

"Why are they coming here?" I panted.

"coz Karl Marx is buried 'ere, aint 'e!" he wheezed back.

"Who's Karl Marx?"

"'e's the bloke who invented communism aint 'e!" he said derisively from the height of his eighteen-month age advantage.

Up ahead the police had cordoned off the road, so we bunked each other over a brick-and-cast-iron spiked wall and descended into the ghostly dense underbrush of an old cemetery. Lost, I followed the other boys on

the narrow dark paths, hoping they knew where they were going. Old tombstones creaked at all angles as fanciful souvenirs covered with moss and ivy watched my passage. Crashing through a hedge we emerged onto a sunnier, wider, gravel path.

Avoiding spectators milling along the edges of the path, we shimmied beside the imposing tombstones until I saw a large rectangular granite obelisk with a huge bronze head perched on top. So that was Karl Marx! A phalanx of people walking down the path with police, reporters, and secret service types scurrying ahead, precipitated an expectant buzz from the onlookers. In the vanguard, a short, bald, fat man smiled and waved nonchalantly to the sparse crowd on either side. I recognized him from the telly! It was Nikita Khrushchev, the president of Russia! This was the man who could annihilate the whole of England four minutes after he pressed a red button in the Kremlin, the man I had seen banging his shoe on a table at the United Nations liked a spoiled brat.

Passing by, Khrushchev in fact looked a bit like my avuncular grandfather who had died the year before. Behind him marched other dignitaries and Russian military officers with those comically oversized hats. The group gathered stiffly around Marx's grave. An attendant handed Khrushchev a flowered wreath and he placed it in front of the imposing metallic head that towered over his shiny pate. With the appropriate homage given, the international procession now made its way back up the path to their bullet-and-bomb-proof vehicles waiting at the gates.

So I learned of the strong Russian connections to my neighborhood. That night it took quite a while to convince my Mum that I had actually seen the President of Russia.

Over the next few years other dignitaries made the journey to the cemetery to pay their respects. For me, the most memorable was Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space. I was following the space race avidly and he was god! Waiting at the edge of the gravel path his eyes locked briefly with mine when he walked by smiling and waving. He was so small, no taller than me, a below-average height eleven year old.

A short distance from the cemetery was the Russian Trade Delegation, nestled behind solid walls and dense foliage. The Soviet embassy was in central London, and this blocky building was their “country dacha.” Occasionally the gates would open and a Zil would slither down the hill towards a dubious meeting with diplomats and trade officials.

At thirteen, I began working on Saturdays at Cavours Hardware store, and into the shop came the inhabitants of the trade delegation. Their fashion sense, both men and women, reminded me of those early fifties styles in my family photo album. In swinging London, their outré fashions stood out sharply. The men, in their dark overcoats, would bustle into the shop, walk around picking up items and try to communicate their needs to us. It appeared that being a trade attaché in London didn't require you to know a word of English! Money was an issue with them as they always bought very inexpensive goods after much deliberation. With James Bond and the whole spy movie genre simultaneously exploding around the world, here I was actually hanging out with spies, even learning from them a few Russian words and phrases

After a couple of years we noticed a puzzling pattern that occurred at irregular intervals. It would begin when Russian wives started to descend on the store with their husbands in tow. With Slavic determination the women would march around the crowded aisles plucking plastic kitchen goods off the shelves and thrusting the angular shapes into the overloaded arms of their abashed international spy husbands. Plastic buckets, squeegee mops, dish racks, brooms and pegs were now clutched to their bosoms, not alas, the scandalous Mandy Rice-Davis. The frenetic shopping sprees would randomly end as abruptly as they began and the participants would not be seen again.

Eventually we pieced their curious behavior together with tactful questions and some media clues to stumble onto red-hot international intrigue. With just a few hours notice the Russians were told that they were going to be purged from Britain for spying. A corresponding expulsion of the British delegation in Moscow would also occur. Consequently, immediate deportation spurred the spies' wives to

descend hungrily on our store to buy up all the things they couldn't get in Russia. It turned out plastic kitchenware was like gold to Soviet housewives. Armed with this mundane knowledge we now knew, even before the press, if another embarrassing spy scandal was about to shake the government.