

THEY CALLED ME A



By
**BETTY JEAN
KOFERTS**
as told to
James Joseph

She was an American schoolteacher, he a Russian engineering student; they met and an idyllic friendship became an Iron Curtain nightmare

ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT SHORE

I HAD SCARCELY lifted the telephone—an old-fashioned cradle type like most in Russia—when I heard the strange, yet unmistakable clicking. The phone in my Leningrad hotel room was being tapped!

"Betty," a youthful voice said in urgent, labored English, "I'm calling about Dimitri. He's been arrested by..."

Click, click—there it was again. "I can't talk now," I said, and slammed down the receiver.

I stood there, my hand glued to the phone, trembling and scarcely believing. Dimitri arrested? The handsome young Soviet civil-engineering student I'd met casually and quite by chance two days before in a Leningrad park—arrested by the Secret Police?

Suddenly I was tense with fear—afraid for Dimitri and more afraid for myself. If they'd arrested Dimitri—and for no other reason than that he'd dated me twice—what was to become of me, an American girl alone and a stranger in Russia?

Like an estimated 30,000 Americans who visited the Soviet Union last summer, I'd come as a tourist—a fifth-grade schoolteacher from Los Angeles on my first trip behind the Iron Curtain. Now, after only two days in the U.S.S.R., I'd been inexplicably caught up in the cold war, my phone tapped, my every move scrutinized, and the boy I'd casually dated, arrested.

I didn't know, then, of course, that they'd branded the camera I carried—what tourist doesn't?—a "tool of imperialism," and me, Betty Jean

Koferts, only four years out of teachers' college, a "Pentagon spy."

In those fearful moments after I slammed down the phone, I remembered my mother's warning.

"If you do decide to visit Russia," she cautioned on seeing me off for Europe from Los Angeles International Airport six weeks before, "better join some other Americans. Don't go alone."

But the *Intourist* agent at the Soviet embassy in Copenhagen—where I picked up my visitor's visa, permitting me three days in Leningrad and four in Moscow—had scoffed.

"You've been traveling alone in Europe," he said airily, "so why not in the peaceful Soviet Union?"

"Besides," he assured me, "we welcome an exchange of ideas and of tourists—especially pretty American schoolteachers."

I'd been flattered, and what woman wouldn't be? But now? Now as I clutched that ominous phone in Leningrad's ornate Hotel Baltic, I was suddenly remembering: the stone-faced Russian woman, a floor matron in the hotel, whose desk flanked the elevator and whose eyes watched my every coming and going; the slim man in the peach-colored shirt, and how he'd come slowly up the lobby stairway to where Dimitri and I were talking; and Dimitri's casual appraisal of him: "He is an agent of the Secret Police, of course."

Mostly, though, I was remembering Dimitri and how we'd met by a bubbling fountain in a lovely Leningrad park.

The voice—it seemed to come from nowhere—had asked, "You're an American, aren't you?"

Startled, I turned toward the speaker. For hours, while I wandered

alone through downtown Leningrad, I hadn't heard a syllable of English. And I speak no Russian.

"Yes," I stammered, "I am."

"My name is Dimitri," the tall, dark-haired young man said. "Do you mind if I talk with you?"

Of course, I didn't. I'd come to Russia hoping, like any tourist, for the opportunity to meet and talk with an average Russian. Until that moment, the only English-speaking Russians I'd met were the *Intourist* people.

Dimitri was brimming over with curiosity about America, and I about his native Russia. We compared dating—boys take out girls much later in Russia than in America; college—he had Saturday classes, almost unheard of back home; and the future—he hoped to engineer new highways and longed for the day he'd own a car to drive on them (he was amazed that I, an elementary teacher, owned a respectable, though aging, sedan).

I'm Invited to a Party

Only once did politics enter our conversation—when I got a glimpse of a newspaper headline with one familiar word: "U-2."

"It's about the U-2?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, obviously embarrassed, and changed the subject.

Suddenly it began to rain. Dimitri hailed a taxi and took me back to the hotel.

At the door, he asked shyly, "Would you think badly of me if I invited you to a party tonight?"

He caught my hesitation. "There'll be three other couples—students," he reassured me.

"Certainly, I'd love to," I said, and he arranged to pick me up that evening.

Dimitri, tieless, his open-neck shirt as college-casual as his slacks, could have been the boy next door, or an undergraduate on any Ameri-

"PENTAGON SPY"

can campus. He was more shy perhaps, his speech more labored, but I hadn't been prepared to meet an "average" Russian as unaverage as Dimitri.

More surprises came that evening at the party. It took place in a stolid but respectable Leningrad apartment. We munched Russian cheese and bologna sandwiches, drank Ukrainian wine, and jitterbugged to American jazz—Glenn Miller, Erol Gärner, and Frank Sinatra.

But Dimitri wasn't the same when we met in my hotel lobby early the next evening. He was more serious, more restrained, and, for the first time, seemingly conscious that I was an American and he a Russian.

On the stair landing where we sat and talked, he fidgeted, his eyes searching the lobby below. We'd been there half an hour when the man in the peach-colored shirt left his chair and started slowly up the stairs toward us. Dimitri saw him—and blanched. The man climbed deliberately, glanced meaningfully toward Dimitri as he passed, and disappeared on the mezzanine above.

"That man," Dimitri gestured, his eyes suddenly cold, "is from the Secret Police."

"You're joking," I gasped. But Dimitri wasn't. Nor was there anything make-believe in the fear his face showed.

"Be in the lobby later tonight—at 10 p.m.," Dimitri said quietly. "We'll find a place to eat."

"I'll be waiting," I promised.

I was in the lobby at 10—and still there waiting at 11. I felt a strange premonition as I turned toward the elevator for my room. As I did, our eyes met—the peach-shirted man's and mine. He'd been standing there by the elevator, watching me.

The phone call next morning got me out of bed. There were those ominous clicks, as Ivan, one of Dimitri's friends, said to me, "I'm sor-

ry, but he's been arrested."

Afraid, but still scarcely believing, I ran out of my room. I sensed that the peach-shirted man, standing just inside the lobby, had turned quickly as I passed.

Frantically, I looked for a telephone booth—and found one. This would be an untapped call! Moments later, Ivan was on the line. "They arrested him last night as he entered the hotel to meet you," he whispered hoarsely.

"Why?" I shrieked. "What did he do? What did I do?"

There was a moment's silence.

"They interrogated him for three hours, then finally released him just past 1 a.m."

We Plan a Meeting

Suddenly, the phone booth seemed to erupt. Somebody was pounding on the glass, his fists beating a drumming, demanding tattoo. I turned, terrified. The ugly, wizened face pressed against the glass was familiar. Too familiar. I'd seen him before, though just where, I couldn't recall. The recollection was hazy but sure. There had been other times—the same face in other places. And

on more occasions than one. Now he had one hand on the booth door, the other raised in a clenched fist. And he was muttering unintelligibly in Russian.

I was terrified—and furious. A woman can be both. I wrenched open the door and screamed, "Go away. I'm phoning."

He fell back, startled, not comprehending, I'm sure, but dumbfounded. I turned back to the phone.

"It's terribly important that Dimitri see you," Ivan was saying. "Can you meet him at the corner of (and he named the two streets) at 4 p.m.?"

"Yes," I said, "I'll be there. Four o'clock sharp."

At first, I didn't see Dimitri. He'd brought along a crowd, a half-dozen boys from the university. From somewhere among them, a voice I recognized said, "Betty, walk ahead of me."

And then we were suddenly alone, though not really alone at all, for Dimitri had chosen one of Leningrad's busiest intersections for our

(Continued)



Though under constant surveillance by the Russian Secret Police, Betty and Dimitri risked their lives to meet again—perhaps for the last time.