FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE: FAMILY, HOCKEY, POLITICS

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I must be one of the few Canadians of my generation who can't remember where he was, or what he was doing, when Paul Henderson scored his winning goal in the 1972 Canada-Soviet hockey 'Summit Series.' I was attending school in Massachusetts in the fall of 1972 and the local media barely seemed aware that the Series was happening. In an unhappy coincidence, the four Canada-Soviet games in Canada conflicted with the 1972 Summer Olympics and U.S. media outlets were completely focused on events in Munich. I ended up riveted to my television in early September, but it was because of the unfolding story of the massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Games.

Even if the Canadian games in the Summit Series had been readily available in the Massachusetts local media, the truth is that I wasn't that interested in the series, initially. Like many Canadians, I believed the hype about the National Hockey League (NHL) being the best hockey in the world and assumed the NHL players would win easily. The prospect of an NHL walkover seemed to reduce the importance of the series to a mere cultural exchange, something like going and watching a visiting Soviet dance troupe. Adding to this indifference, by the time I reached my 20s, I wasn't a particularly devoted hockey fan anymore. As a boy I idolized the Maple Leafs, but I was never a very good player myself. After a few mediocre seasons of house league hockey, I developed a stronger interest in other sports.

I had also grown sick of the arrogance and sense of entitlement regularly demonstrated by NHL owners during the 1960s. In my view, the league was a cartel, pure and simple, with all of the worst features of a business that had uncontested control of its workers and a monopoly over the product it was selling. In that regard, I resented the way the league had chosen to expand to California rather than Vancouver in the mid-1960s and I was simply astounded when Clarence Campbell told a Canadian anti-combines hearing that the NHL was a 'public service,' rather than a business, and should therefore be exempt from legal regulation. The formation of the World Hockey Association for the 1972 season piqued my interest, but, in the months leading up to the Summit Series, I was disgusted to read how NHL owners had refused to let Bobby Hull play for Team Canada, because of his 'defection' to the rival league.

So, for one reason or another, I just couldn't see how the Team Canada-Soviet series was even near to the Munich Olympics in importance. However, after an early September phone call home, I became much more interested in the Series. I was shocked to hear that the Soviets had won the first game by a large score, but strangely comforted to hear that the Canadians had won the second game. More importantly, my father told me that he had arranged tickets for himself and my grandfather to join the Canadian delegation that was heading to Moscow later in the month for the Soviet leg of the series. I was surprised at the news because, while Dad had played a bit of hockey growing up in Manitoba, and still enjoyed the game, he also believed that sport was something you outgrew as you moved into adulthood. He wasn't really a diehard fan. Nonetheless, a few of Dad's business associates had been talking up the idea of going to Moscow and Dad thought it would be an excellent opportunity to give his own father, now in his early 80s, an opportunity to revisit Moscow.

I say, 'revisit' Moscow, because my grandfather had attended university in Moscow before the revolution in 1917. My grandparents were Mennonites, living in the Ukraine, but Grandpa had spent five years in Moscow, before returning to a job as a schoolteacher in the village of Nieder, Chortitza. My father and grandfather had a reasonably good relationship, although there had been some issues between them over the previous twenty years. For Dad, the Moscow trip was less about the hockey than about an opportunity to surprise his own father with an opportunity to revisit the Moscow of his youth. In addition, Dad knew the trip was the kind of thing that would give him considerable cachet in Toronto business circles.

Although he enjoyed watching hockey, my grandfather wasn't a diehard hockey fan either. Boxing was his thing, and sometimes, when I was little and Grandpa was babysitting, he let me stay up to watch the Friday night fights with him, and he would teach me how to score the rounds. Still, he was intrigued by the idea of revisiting Moscow and was excited about the upcoming trip. Because he and my father were both born in the Ukraine, several people had warned them that the Soviet Union might declare the two of them 'Soviet citizens' and refuse to allow them to leave Moscow when the series ended. Neither Dad nor Grandpa were convinced this was likely, but there was a great deal of cold war paranoia in Canada in the early 1970s, and Dad told me that the idea that they might somehow be detained in Moscow was always in the back of their minds.

The Soviet Union was at the height of its power in the early 1970s. Post-Stalinist economic reforms had raised living standards and the Soviet economy was booming. During the late 1960s, the Soviet Union had become the world's leading producer of oil and steel, as well as a leading exporter of heavy machinery. At the same time, the space race had dramatized the technical capacities of Soviet science. Domestically, and counter to many western stereotypes, Soviet citizens were also experiencing the growth of a modest urban consumer culture. There was a construction boom in new apartments in several major cities and growing numbers of Soviet citizens were able to afford light consumer goods such as dishwashers and televisions. On the political front, the growing scale of Soviet military power, matched with the successes of communist forces in Asia, and the spread of Soviet influence through parts of Africa, Latin America and South America, lent confidence to Soviet political leaders and had a disquieting effect on western governments.

There is no doubt that the Soviet leadership saw 'culture' as an important part of a global propaganda war in the 1960s and 1970s. Soviet dance troupes in ballet and folk dancing were touring widely, as were Soviet musicians and artists. In sport, Soviet teams and athletes toured as 'good will' ambassadors, running instructional clinics and providing resources for sporting development in many Asian, African and South American countries. As part of these initiatives the Soviet Union championed the acceptance of teams from Southern Nations into the Olympics. At the same time, the Soviet Union invested heavily in sport, recognizing how victories in international competitions could be celebrated, both as the achievements of centralized state planning and of a communist system committed to giving every child who showed athletic ability an opportunity to achieve greatness.

So, for the Soviets, the Summit Series with Canadian professional hockey players really mattered. The players and team management played down expectations and publicly stated their awe at the skill of Canadian professionals, but my Grandfather told me on the phone as the teams readied themselves to go to Moscow that "anyone who knew anything about the Soviets would have known that they would never have agreed to the Series if they didn't think they could win." For the Soviets, he explained, the Series was never going to be "just a cultural exchange." Rather, it was important to see it in the context of the whole Soviet approach to the use of culture to advance the Soviet geopolitical cause. In that one phone call my grandfather demonstrated more wisdom than the vast majority of Canada's press corps at the time.

In Toronto, my father was a successful businessman, and over the years he had become the alpha figure in his relationship with my grandfather. When my grandfather's financial prospects had faltered, Dad even employed Grandpa for several years. But, if my grandfather felt humiliated at all by having to work for his son, he never showed it to me. Almost magically, however, when the 3,000 person Canadian delegation arrived in Moscow, the status relations between my father and grandfather reversed. Grandpa spoke perfect Russian and had knowledge of the history of Moscow, and of Russian culture, that few of the other Canadian fans could match. He charmed the Intourist guides assigned to their group and he became an informal liaison between staff at the Intourist hotel and the Canadian guests. He was also much in demand because he could translate Russian media accounts of events as they unfolded. The Summit Series was unexpectedly proving to be my grandfather's Renaissance.

After losing the fifth game, the sixth game in the Series turned out to be a badly-needed victory for Team Canada, hard won in an environment of escalating tension. My father told me on his return that he and Grandpa were sitting in the room sharing a glass of white wine when they heard a loud knock at the door. Two men, dressed in black suits, entered the room and demanded to know if my grandfather was "Cornelius Grunau, formerly of the village of Chortitza." Dad told me he and Grandpa looked at each other thinking, "Ok, this is it, we are never going to be allowed to go home. They are going to take us to Siberia." But, instead, the visitors announced that if my grandfather was interested they had taken the liberty of arranging a trip for him back to his home village in the Ukraine. When the visitors left, he and my grandfather laughed for several minutes. Afterwards Dad told me: "When Henderson scored that goal, we were all really excited. But, I have to say, the feeling was nothing like the feeling of elation we both shared when we found out we weren't going to Siberia!"

I tried to find a radio feed in Massachusetts to listen to the final game, but to no avail. Later, I read that Paul Henderson had scored to win the Series for Canada, but, more importantly, my Mom called and told me she had received a telegram saying that Dad and Grandpa were fine and having a great time celebrating with everyone else.

My grandfather passed away in 1974, and I spent some time with him in hospital a few days before his death. We talked about a lot of things, including the Moscow trip, and in those conversations he mentioned that he too had become swept up in the hockey 'battle.' But, he also said he had felt "very embarrassed" by the behaviour of some of the Canadian players, and even the Canadian fans at times. Bobby Clarke's infamous slash on Valery Kharlamov was the low point, he said, and he felt a need to apologize for it in Russian to people at the hotel. But, the Series was something that had been profoundly important to him; not so much because of the hockey, but, rather, because of the time that he spent strengthening his relationship with his son, and, as my father had hoped, because Grandpa was able to embrace the feeling that his life had, indeed, come full circle.

Whenever I see a picture of Henderson's winning goal I don't think of what it meant, or didn't mean, for Cold War politics, or for the Canadian psyche, to win the Summit Series. In the end, I think the importance of the series, in this regard, has been vastly overblown. Nor do I think about how hockey changed, and certainly for the better, after the Series. Instead, I can't help but think of my father and grandfather together in Moscow, arm in arm, with wine glasses raised, celebrating Canada, celebrating life.