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*Soviets Igor Ostapets and Toomas Tamm
survived an academic and cultural avalanche
during their year at Lafayette*

by Geoff Gehman '80

Toomas Yuryevich Tamm scans the notebook until he finds a typically loony American expression. "Bell don't make; please bump," he quotes, a tiny tremor of glee flicking across his face. The interviewer questions the meaning. "Doorbell not working; please knock," Tamm says. "It's Pennsylvania Dutch." Eight months after entering the United States for the first time, the Estonian is relishing and decoding the forked dialects of a forked language.

Tamm collects examples of billboard slogans, television pitches, traffic commands. Igor Vitalevich Ostapets animates them. A devoted explorer of the English language since only last August, he is shooting buzz words and catchy phrases with the zest of a copywriter. "Of course I attended every party on campus," the Belorussian explains. "It's what you have to do weekends. You know: endless party." *This guy belongs to the Pepsi Generation*, mulls the interviewer. "My roommates tell me I use more slang than they do," Ostapets admits. "You have improved in that sense," chimes Tamm.

Yes, these Soviets adjusted quite well during their two semesters at Lafayette. Tamm and Ostapets were guinea

pigs in the first completely integrated, unescorted, undergraduate exchange program between the United States and the Soviet Union. Thanks to the American Collegiate Consortium for Cultural and Academic Exchange and the USSR Ministry for Higher and Secondary Specialized Education, 56 Soviets participated in yet another *glasnost*-tied project, joining the ranks of ice hockey players, rock-and-roll musicians, journalists, and war veterans.

The Soviets' discovery of America began last August with a three-week orientation at Middlebury College, one of 26 American host schools during the first year. Participants brushed up on conversational English; tested computers; heard lectures on American culture, literature, and politics. Yet Ostapets and Tamm agree that nothing adequately prepared them for the avalanche of new academic subjects, teaching methods, and diverse mindsets.

English around the clock initially baffled Ostapets, a fourth-year international law major from Belorussian State University. In Minsk his English speaking had been limited to "I am Igor"; "I was born in 1966"; "My parents are doctors." At Middlebury he depended too heavily on translators. At Lafayette, unaccustomed to reading hundreds of pages per week—in English or Russian—he found himself hibernating in Skillman Library. He says it took him about three months to touch "solid ground."

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Toomas Tamm, when not capturing his experiences on film, was in the computer center trying to link up around the world.

Tamm was practically an interpreter compared to his fellow countryman. He had read, heard, and mouthed English on and off for about 13 years. Yet he resisted many class discussions for approximately two months. "Generally there was no understanding problem," notes the fifth-year quantum-chemistry student from Tartu State University. "I just wasn't fast enough. I had to plan out answers before I could speak."

"He spoke very clearly but slowly because he was translating in his head, trying to understand," explains Thomas S. Lillie, assistant professor of chemistry and Tamm's academic adviser at Lafayette. "He knew what was going on, but found it hard to articulate it."

The Lafayette guests adapted to their adopted language with the help of several aids. Tamm spent hours tapping into on- and off-campus electronic mail circuits, and sent messages to exchange students across the country and friends around the world. Ostapets gorged on the social rewards of sports. "Knowing that there were people on campus who knew him, that he could say 'See you later at practice,' I think that made him more confident," says soccer coach Steven Reinhardt. "He was more than happy to hang around with the players—in the locker room, on bus rides, after hours. Sometimes he tried to act like he didn't understand. He tried to be a tourist at times. But he knew exactly what was going on all the time."

"No joke—two weeks and he was fine," says Joseph Crevino, Jr. '89, one of Ostapets's roommates at Kirby House. Crevino indicates that he loaned the Soviet his poster of John Lennon after Ostapets had quipped: "Don't crack on Lennon (Lenin)." It was the Soviet, Crevino says, who asked the American if his cable-ready television could receive The Playboy Channel. It was the Soviet who briefed the American on episodes of "The Munsters" and "Taxi." Notes Crevino: "He liked American profanities quite a bit."

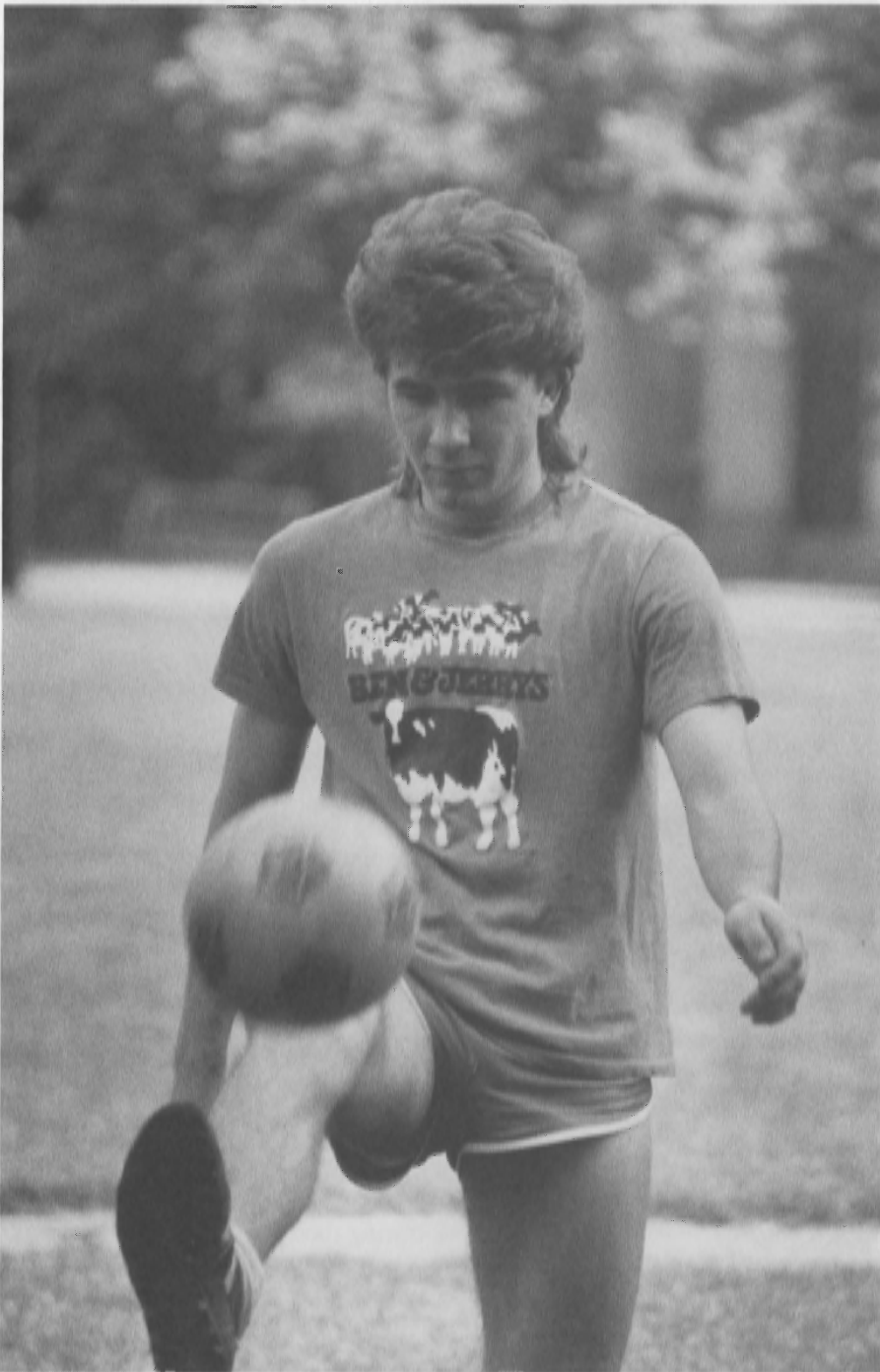
Unlike the majority of on-campus intermediaries, Rado Pribic, Lafayette's coordinator of the exchange program and a frequent leader of

College trips to the Soviet Union, met weekly with the visitors. "He's God and mother and president and the KGB and the FBI," says Ostapets of the professor of languages and literature. With a nervous laugh, he adds: "No, you better not say KGB and FBI."

While mastering the language was somewhat frustrating, selecting academic electives was less bothersome

for Ostapets and Tamm. Until recently, Soviet universities did not offer academic options: students not only study exclusively within their major, they are required to declare their specialty about two years sooner than their U.S. counterparts. One rule of the exchange program is that participants must take up to 50 percent of their courses outside their major—the better to absorb Ameri-

Real 'Pard Igor Ostapets played soccer, made the party circuit—and the Dean's List.



Greg Arsky '89

can educational methods and profiles. Freed from six- to seven-hour chemistry labs (they last only three hours at Lafayette) and without a quantum chemistry class to take, Tamm decided to compose electronic music, investigate artificial minds, survey the cosmos, and audit an overview of modern philosophy. Ostapets examined the deviant behavior of groups and democratic politics, both courses inside his field. But he also carved out a sub-interest: studying how Americans learn about legal systems abroad.

After finishing a class in international law and organization, he back-tracked to Introduction to International Law. This elementary pedagogy "was not very helpful in his career but good for him personally," says Vladimir Wozniuk, assistant professor of government and law and the teacher of both courses.

Ostapets entered a brave new world when discussing the Warsaw Pact/Warsaw Treaty Organization. According to Wozniuk, Ostapets originally insisted that the 1955 agreement for unified military command between the Soviet Union and its satellites was solely a reaction to the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). "Insufficient information" directed this "somewhat naive" stance, notes Wozniuk, a Sovietologist and Russian speaker. "The Soviets look at the Warsaw Pact pretty rigidly: the United States is still responsible for the Cold War, the Soviets had little to do with it. The feeling is the Americans fought for NATO, they began the Cold War; we had to defend ourselves against the aggressive capitalist/imperialists."

Wozniuk says Ostapets's hard-line attitude softened as he considered other voices. "It was not so much that he was coming around to our views," notes the teacher, "but rather that he was exposed to a wider breadth of opinion and analysis."

Tamm's fiercely clinical training occasionally handicapped him. "He wanted to know what all the results would be but sometimes it doesn't work that way," recalls Lillie of the student's problems with an independent project. "He was trying to analyze how an accident is going to hap-

pen in a car before you're going to drive. . . . It was part of his nature that he wanted to do everything correctly. He asked himself thousands of questions—maybe too many questions at the start."

Tamm and Ostapets became articulate enough to lead class discussions. Tamm could not enroll in a quantum-chemistry course because it is not offered at Lafayette. The Estonian compensated by controlling the quantum portion of his Structure Determination class. "I was explaining something and he told me: 'Let me explain it again.' So he went to the front of the class and took it over," notes Lillie, now a research scientist at Procter & Gamble. "He probably knew more about the subject than I did at the beginning of the class. . . . He would ask questions either you had never thought of before, or had taken for granted for so long that you couldn't explain them anymore."

Ostapets headed a session in modern/contemporary Soviet history, part of a course on Europe from 1917 to the present day. A member of the Communist Party and a Marxist, he backed the Russian Revolution. "It's not unusual for him to think of Lenin as the George Washington of the Soviet Union," says Robert I. Weiner, associate professor of history. "At the same time, he believes that socialism can be democratic, not totalitarian and bureaucratic." Not surprisingly, Ostapets lashed Stalin and his henchmen for purges and red tape. "The period was a blot on Russian history, and he dealt with it as such," says Weiner. "He talked about the Stalinist era with enormous pain—about the loss of freedom of speech, about victimization, about self-victimization. He also sought to explain why events happened and to criticize the Western approach."

According to Weiner, Ostapets blossomed when addressing the Soviet policy which had helped send him to the United States. "The more the Gorbachev era unfolded, the more willing he was to talk about his country," notes the professor. "He's a strong supporter of what Gorbachev is doing. Our students were shocked, in a sense, by the kind of

pride he had in his country, and the kind of pride he had in a country which is in a process of development."

New testing methods awaited Tamm and Ostapets. Oral exams prefaced by a list of possible topics are the norm in Soviet classrooms, with most written tests given at the end of the five-year curriculum. Teachers generally demand rote memorization; "repetition is the mother of learning" is a veteran Russian proverb and Soviet educational motto. At Lafayette the exchange students were asked much more frequently to invent, analyze, debate—and write. Q&As and quizzes came with lectures this time; theories were not just for duplicating.

"Toomas was not used to multiple written exams," says Lillie. "It was

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Thomas S. Lillie
Asst. Professor of
Chemistry

more likely for him to have one oral comprehensive exam at the end of a course." Notes Wozniuk: "The entire experience of American education hit Igor square in the face."

The Soviet duo apparently mastered the challenges of American academics. Tamm and Ostapets made the Dean's List in both semesters. Ostapets finished with a 3.875 cum, not a shabby mark for someone who

insists that "learning English was a question of survival." Tamm scored .14 higher, a victory undoubtedly connected to attending fewer parties.

Both kept busy outside the classroom. Tamm's computer obsession extended to coordinating a trip to a competition in computer programming, a journey canceled by unavailable transportation. "He was a steady user—I would be surprised if he didn't log in most days," says Tracy Logan of Academic Computing Services. "He was a good citizen in terms of encouraging others—sharing tips, methods, techniques." Try as he might, Tamm never found an electronic link to the Soviet Union. "I'm waiting for the day when I get a message from him," says Logan. "I think it will be a few milliseconds after the link is created."

In addition to his fall soccer assignment, Ostapets sang and strummed folk songs at the Russian Club's Christmas party and the International Extravaganza. His spunk—and slang—won him honorary memberships in Kirby House and Phi Gamma Delta.

For reporters, brown-baggers, and other curious Westerners, Ostapets and Tamm eagerly divided fact from fantasy about their homeland. Yes, Estonia differs dramatically from Belorussia and many other republics, Tamm insisted. No, he and Ostapets indicated, Soviets don't queue forever for every item every day. According to Tamm, citizens don't ask "for two packages no matter what they are," as in the film "Moscow on the Hudson." In fact, the longest wait tends to be for cars. Most are delivered after a minimum of two to three years, and only if the proper lump sum is ready. In the Soviet Union "you can't just go into an office and apply for a visa," notes Tamm. "They would just throw you out. There has to be a reason—a program like this." Adds Ostapets: "You can wait until you're 82, 83 to get a visa." He calculates silently for a few moments and announces, "Your great-great grandchildren will be able to travel." Even with a visa, Ostapets points out, each leg of a round trip will cost the same.

Newly liberated, Tamm and Ostapets befriended the American road.

Igor Ostapets and Toomas Tamm arrived in the United States with 54 students from Soviet educational institutions. How did the other visitors fare during their nine-month undergraduate pilgrimage?

Fumbling with a new language was a common early activity. "We were surprised by the number of Soviet students who didn't know adequate English," says Rado Pribic, professor of foreign languages and literature and the program liaison for Lafayette. Ease in choosing their first electives was the exception rather than the rule for the Soviets, according to Kathryn Brown, executive assistant of the American Collegiate Consortium for Cultural and Academic Exchange. More than a few encountered programming bugs. Brown says one student was overqualified for undergraduate physics courses and, because of a program rule, was not permitted to take graduate-level classes. "He didn't have the personality to adjust," Brown adds. "He didn't want to study political science, biology, computers. So he left."

Many of the Soviets analyzed familiar subjects with new tilts. According to Brown, courses with an emphasis on Western views of Soviet foreign policy were especially popular. A fair number enrolled in courses unavailable in the USSR. The teaching of karate is outlawed back home; Harlem's cultural explosion is basically irrelevant. Not surprisingly, the visitors "had a real hard time with the dialect," Brown admits.

With *perestroika* and *glasnost* saturating the air, it is not surprising that the Soviets generally were media darlings. Some exchange students wrote articles for publications; one participant composed a booklet and donated royalties to the consortium. "Rock Around the Bloc" was the snappiest title for new radio shows.

What awaits the United States trailblazers in the USSR in 1989–90? Douglas Epstein '90, Jeff Steele '91, and 63 students began with an orientation course this summer at Middlebury College. The Lafayette duo will head for Helsinki and Mos-

cow before settling at their permanent institutions—Steele at Odessa State University, Epstein at Leningrad State University. Like Tamm and Ostapets, one is handier in Russian than the other. Epstein has studied the language since eighth grade while Steele is a novice.

Under the most convenient "old" system, Americans studied only with other Americans at one of two Soviet institutions. If the Americans needed help—emotional support, directions, tickets, language tips, protocol—they could ask a pair of English-speaking guides on campus. Chaperones won't be around this time.

"Our program sort of throws them in the water," notes Brown.

"... If there are no bedsheets, they can't go to a director and say in English: 'I don't have any.' They have to find out from someone in the dorm. They might have to go to someone outside the dorm. They have to go through the harrowing experience of getting bedsheets. . . . They learn all the more because of it."

Most of the Westerners will witness a nation in gestation. Under *perestroika*, entrepreneurs are on the rise and companies are accepting strange new assignments (imagine an aviation factory producing pasta). *Glasnost* means that more teachers are being taught to teach sex education, and that more dissident works will be added to the curriculum. Brown predicts that republics will demand the right to create international exchanges of all types, in an attempt to skirt bureaucracy.

Brown expects the current pool of 29 American member institutions participating in the consortium program will grow (Lehigh University is set to enter the program next year). A newsletter for Soviet and American student participants, she adds, will include information about program alumni at conferences, births of alumni children, etc. One news item definitely will make the cut.

This spring a choir from Bates College in Maine performed in Tbisly, Soviet Georgia. Parents of an exchange student at the Maine institution invited the touring singers to an afternoon party. Now, that is a toast to *glasnost*. □ —W.G.G.

Regional destinations included New York, Washington, Boston, and Lancaster, PA (home of "Bell don't make; please bump"). Between semesters Tamm stayed for about 10 days in Michigan with Lillie's parents. He bowled and downhill skied for the first time. "He was a kamikaze," reports Lillie. Ostapets visited a roommate's family in San Francisco over spring break. During the same period Tamm finally got his fix

initially astounded the visitors. Tamm learned that U.S. companies sell cheaper electronic goods and more durable clothing. Ostapets made the startling discovery that many items—a baseball cap, for example—cost \$20 in local malls. Books by Solzhenitsyn, he says, "are easier to find here, and not quite as illegal."

Tamm and Ostapets returned to the Soviet Union in May. Tamm

Ostapets is enrolled at his university this summer. After completing his final full year of school, he expects to become a criminal lawyer. Tamm predicts a job as a lab assistant. He admits that graduate study in the United States is a possibility.

The guests imprinted themselves on the memories of a fair number of the Lafayette community. At times Crevino was asked so many questions about Ostapets that he felt he



Coordinator of Soviet exchanges at Lafayette is Rado Pribic (right), Professor of Modern Languages.

of quantum chemistry at a conference in Florida. All along, he perked up his bible of sayings. "Talking about talking about running around"—source unknown—was one of the gems documented. Tamm unravels the expression with the irony and wonder of someone mad about a new hobby.

Comparison shopping became another amusement. The great variety of consumer goods like shampoo

carried new camera equipment, software, and a bundle of junk mail. "He wanted to save it to see how many kilograms we get here," explains Philip Greeley '91, a roommate at McKelvy House. Ostapets hauled home a VCR, music videos, and healthier lungs, courtesy of quitting smoking. Mixed feelings were part of the baggage for both students. Homesickness had ended, but so had a number of opportunities.

was becoming an interpreter, or at least a conduit. "A lot of people knew I lived with Igor," notes the American. "He was very open to anything—a lot more open than we are to what he thinks....He had a much better understanding of the United States than I did of the Soviet Union."

"Our presence," Ostapets says matter of factly, "has led to some kind of interruption." □