Back to the U.S.S.R.

Soviets Igor O斯塔pets and Toomas Tamм survived an academic and cultural avalanche during their year at Lafayette

by Geoff Gehman '80

Toomas Yuryevich Tamм scans the notebook until he finds a typically loopy American expression. "Bell don't wake; please bump," he quotes, a tiny tremor of glee flicking across his face. The interviewer quizzically mumbles, "Doorknob not working; please knock." Tamм 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. Tamм collects examples of billboard slogans, television pitchers, traffic commands. Igor Vitalyevich O斯塔pets 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," O斯塔pets admits. "You have improved in that sense," chimes Tamм. Yes, these Soviets adjusted quite well during their two semesters at Lafayette. Tamм and O斯塔pets were guinea pigs in the first completely integrated, unescorted, under-graduate 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, five Soviets participated in yet another glasnost-died 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 O斯塔pets and Tamм agree that nothing adequately prepared them for the avalanche of new academic subjects, teaching methods, and diverse mindsets. English around the clock initially baffled O斯塔pets, 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 Skimilin Library. He says it took him about three months to touch "solid ground."
Thomas Tuzum, 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 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 at 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-
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Unlike the majority of on-campus
intermediaries, Rado Prbic, 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 O斯塔ets
of the professors of languages and lit-
erature. With a nervous laugh, he
adds: "No, you better not say KGB
and FBI."

While mastering the language was
somewhat frustrating, selecting aca-
demic electives was less bothersome
for O斯塔ets and Tamm. Until re-
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One rule of the exchange program is
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percent of their courses outside their
major—the better to absorb Ameri-
can educational methods and pro-
files. Freed from six- to seven-hour
classes (often lasting only three
hours at Lafayette) and without a
quantum chemistry class to take,
Tamm decided to enroll in electro-
nic music, investigate artificial
minds, survey the cosmos, and audit
an overview of all Russian philosophy.
O斯塔ets examined the deviant be-
havior of great political leaders,
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 interna-
tional law and organization, he
back-tracked to Introduction to In-
ternational Law. This elementary
pedagogy "was not very helpful in
his career but good for him person-
ally," says Vladimir Wozniuk, assist-
ant professor of government and
law and the teacher of both classes.

O斯塔ets entered a brave new
world when discussing the Warsaw
 Pact/Warsaw Treaty Organization.
According to Wozniuk, O斯塔ets
originally insisted that the 1955
agreement for unified military com-
mand between the Soviet Union and
its satellites was solely a reaction to
the formation of the North Atlantic
Treaty Organizations (NATO). "In-
sufficient information" directed this
"somewhat naive" stance, notes
Wozniuk, a Sovietologist and Rus-
sian 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 de-
fend ourselves against the aggres-
sive capitalism/imperialism."

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

Tamm's fiercely clinical training
case occasionally handicapped him. "He
wanted to know what all the results
would be but sometimes he doesn't
work that way," recalls Lillie of the
student's problems with an indepen-
dent project. "He was trying to ana-
lyze 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 know causality cor-
rectly. He asked himself thousands
of questions—maybe too many ques-
tions at the same time."

Tamm and O斯塔ets became articu-
late enough to lead class discus-
sions. Tamm could not enroll in a
quantum-chemistry course because it
is not offered at Lafayette. The Es-
stonian compensated by controlling
the quantum portion of his Structure
Determination class. "I was explain-
ing 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 sub-
ject than I did at the beginning of the
class... He would ask questions
whether you had never thought of be-
fore, or had taken for granted for so
long that you couldn't explain them
anymore.

O斯塔ets headed a session in mod-
ern/contemporary Soviet history,
part of a course on Europe from
1917 to the present day. A member
of the Communist Party and
Marxist, he backed the Russian Re-
volution. "It's not unusual for him
to think of Lenin as the George Wash-
ington of the Soviet Union," says
Robert I. Weiner, associate professor
of history. "At the same time, he be-
lieves that socialism can be demo-
cratic, not totalitarian and bureau-
cratic." Not surprisingly, O斯塔ets
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 Stalin-
ist era with enormous pain—about
the loss of freedom of speech, about
victimization, about self-victimiza-
tion. He also sought to explain why
events happened and to criticize the
Western approach."

According to Weiner, O斯塔ets
blossomed when addressing the So-
viet 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 Gorbach-
v 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 O斯塔ets. Oral exams
pitting a list of possible topics
are the norm in Soviet classrooms,
with most written tests given at the
day's end. Teachers generally demand
rote memorization; "repetition is the
mother of learning" is a veteran
Russian proverb and Soviet educa-
tional motto. At Lafayette the ex-
change students were asked much
more frequently to invent, analyze,
debate—and write. Q&A's 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
more likely for him to have one oral
comprehensive exam at the end of a
course." Notes Wozniuk: "The en-
tire experience of American educa-
tion hit Igor square in the face."

The Soviet duo apparently mas-
ter the challenges of American ac-
demics. Tamm and O斯塔ets made
them more comfortable in both semesters.
O斯塔ets finished with a 3.875 cum,
not a shabby mark for someone who
Igor Ostopets 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 language and literature and the program's 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 snapshot 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 an orientation course this summer at Middlebury College. The Lafayette duo will head for Helsinki and Moscow before settling at their permanent institutions—Steele at Odessa State University, Epstein at Leningrad State University. Like Tamm and Ostopets, one is handler in Russian under 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 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 bed sheets. . . ." 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 pastas). Glasnost means that more teachers are being taught to teach sex education, and that more dissident works will be published. Brown predicts that republics will demand the right to create intercultural 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 Tbilis, 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.O.G.
insists that "learning English was a question of survival." Tamam scored 14 higher on the TOEFL than his classmates. His application to the American university was connected to attending fewer parties. He was busy studying and focusing on his work.

Both Because and Ostadepsen believed that a college education was important. Because to Tamam, a college education was a ticket to future success. Ostadepsen, on the other hand, believed that a college education was a way to improve his language skills.

In the United States, Tamam and Ostadepsen attended a local university. The university had a strong emphasis on research and innovation. The students were encouraged to think critically and to develop their own ideas. They were also expected to be active in their communities and to give back to the community.

Many of the students at the university were international students, and they found it challenging to adapt to the new environment. However, they were also excited to be a part of something new and different. The university provided them with a unique opportunity to learn and grow.

Despite the challenges, Tamam and Ostadepsen both found the experience to be enriching. They were able to learn about new culture and to interact with people from all over the world. They also gained valuable skills and knowledge that they could use in their future careers.

Tamam learned that U.S. companies sell cheaper electronic goods and more durable clothing. Ostadepsen made the starting discovery that many items—a baseball cap, for example—cost $20 in local malls. Books by Solheimsson, he says, "are easier to find here, and not quite as illegal."

Tamam and Ostadepsen returned to the Soviet Union in May. Tamam initially stounded the visitors.

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

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

Regional destinations included New York, Washington, Boston, and Lancaster, PA (home of "Tell don't make; please bumpt"). Between sev- esters Tamam stayed for about 50 days in Michigan with Lilie's parents. He bowed and downhill skied for the first time. "He was a kama- kaze," reports Lilie. Ostadeps visited a roomates's family in San Francisco over spring break. During the same period Tamam finally got his fix of quantum chemistry in a confer- ence in Florida. All along, he peered up his bible of sayings. "Talking about talking about running around ..."

- source unknown — was one of the gems documented. Tamam travells the expression with the irony and wonder of someone mad about a new hobby.

Comparison shopping became another grievance. 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 Greesley '91, a roomate at McKelvy House. Ostadeps hauled home a VCR, music videos, and healthier lungs, courtesy of quitting smoking. Smoking, mixed feelings were part of the package for both students. Homemickness had ended, but so had a number of opportunities.

Ostadepsen was 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," Ostadeps says matter of fact, "has led to some kind of interruption."