

A turning point

After nearly a year of my living in Moscow, in May 1990, UPODEKO (Care Division of the Diplomatic Core), an agency attached to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which provides services for works and daily life to embassies from abroad and representative offices stationed in Russia assigned me an office, and at nearly the same time I was given an apartment as well. There exists a thick forest in the southwest of Moscow, a little before subway terminal station Yugo-Zapadnaya on the left side of it in the direction of the suburbs. In front of the northern tip of this forest there are some apartment buildings and my apartment was in one of the buildings somewhat away from the forest. Half of the building, the south side facing the woods, was for ordinary Russians, while foreigners lived on the north side where the land opened up with a good view.

In the first 10 days of July, I moved into a 3-bedroom apartment on the 14th floor of the north side of the 16-story building. Then for the first time I noticed that the long-term hotel where I had lived till then was not an uncomfortable place for a foreigner stationed without family. There was always staff watching the people to come in and go out at the entrance, whether it was my apartment building or the separate building where my office was, and they would greet me or say something each time I came in or out. Generally I got the impression that they had simple consideration towards other people, regardless of age or sex, which had somehow been lost in Japanese cities. Maybe this is because of the leisurely pace of life, which affords them to have enough room in their minds for concern to others. Things progressed naturally to the point where we ended up having more intimate conversations.

By the way, this entrance staff normally worked together in pairs, with two days off after a 24-hour shift. Maybe because of this working system, the staff was mostly made up of women under thirty with families; the men who did work there were students working part-time if they weren't elderly retirees. It often happened that these workers were free when it turned nine o'clock in the evening, so they would occasionally invite me for a cup of tea or something.

It was a woman not yet twenty-five with blue eyes and blond hair that most frequently spoke to me. I would call her Natasha. She likely gained weight after

getting married and giving birth to a child, that seemed a little bit to have spoiled her look, but I supposed in her girlhood days she had been considerably beautiful girl with slender figure. When she sat at a table, laughing or smiling, her happy face looked attractive and her small, plump hands left one with an idea of feminine gentleness.

Paired up with her was a woman named Galya, slightly older than her, with her brown eyes and black hair. She had a certain power in her eyes, which gave me the impression that she had likely a firm will. A good-natured woman, she always welcomed me with a smile.

On New Year's Eve that year, Galya invited me to her home and gave me the precious experience of welcoming a new year with the Russian people. Her husband was not so tall for a Russian, of medium build, around thirty years old, and you could sense his good heart. When we were introduced, I saw a momentary curiosity float up in his brown eyes, as if he had heard many times about me from his wife and had been waiting to meet me, imagining what kind of man I might be. I didn't really feel the stiffness that so often happens at first meetings; rather both of us were soon able to open up to each other. In addition to myself was a friend of theirs from the neighborhood, a man just under thirty, whose extreme nearsightedness has been cured by the operation so that he could see normally without glasses. For a while, we chatted and drank tea. Different types of alcohol, carefully saved up for a new year, were taken out of the cupboard. After waiting until nearly midnight, Galya's husband led us all in a champagne toast, and we said our good-byes to the old year and drank up. A little later just at midnight, we toasted again welcoming the New Year and drained our glasses. Then the four of us chatted and danced, eating and drinking until dawn. These were very kind people who loved to entertain. Finally, in a bitter coldness at dawn we walked up to the main road together, and this kindness made a very deep impression on me: they waited there for a long time to see me off until at last we got a taxi and I climbed inside.

Now, getting back to the main subject, Natasha and Galya worked together every three days at the counter on the left side of the cozy hall on the first floor of the building, in which my office was. One more person, an elderly man, joined in this working group. His job was mainly to check people coming into the building. At that

time faxes had not yet been widespread and no telex could be fixed in the room I used as an office because of no availability of the power supply and special line for it. So I used the pay service that the women took care of through the telex inside the hall counter on the first floor for means of communication with Tokyo.

Because of this, I was able to join their tea-drinking companions, but it was always not only me, but also several other long-term residents were invited. Carrying with them the bottles of champagne and wine, they would get together one by one to the antechamber to the right inside the hall. Many of them were from Azerbaijan or Eastern Europe, and I would join in their pleasant chat to practice on Russian conversation as well, drinking sweet liquor together with the snacks, such as tomatoes, cucumbers and salami the women would lay out for us, and laugh very often with them. Just because my workplace and residence were very near, I usually went back home after I finished work to sit face to face with loneliness. In view of such situation I think I was fortunate enough to have these occasional times to get a sigh of relief at the warmth of other people, like a person having water at an oasis.

It was thanks to Natasha and Galya that I learned how Russian people celebrate life's turning points—birthdays, International Women's Day and so on. (In Russia, birthdays are an important event even for adults, so when you make friends, you must remember your friend's birthday, and when that day comes, you absolutely must call to wish them a happy birthday. It is the accepted custom of Russian people. Birthdays are often celebrated even in the workplace, but rather than being celebrated, the birthday person feasts co-workers and common friends to express his appreciation of their everyday social ties. It goes without saying that those invited bring flowers or some small present. On International Women's Day, men give presents to the women to show their love.) Feeling the aroma of Russian life near me, thus I could have fairly pleasant and comfortable times over there.

That's why, for a short time immediately after I moved to the new apartment, where people were not stationed at the entrance, and therefore opportunities to meet people were few, I was all the more perplexed at the atmosphere of the building as if it were isolated from the outside world, lacking the warmth of the people it held and sometimes I felt miserable somehow without knowing how to calm myself. In July, it was light outside until after eleven, and I felt somewhat indecisive when I went back

to my apartment, as though I wanted to go outside for a little relaxation. After having beer while preparing supper, I could drive no longer and every place was too far away for walking, and so, as I stared out from the kitchen window, I came to feel as if I was locked in my apartment. To conquer such feeling, I would put on some light music with big sound to distract myself or do some imitation of aerobics in the rhythm of the music for a change. It was in those days that I had holes drilled in the walls, just over a meter apart, and put screws in so that I could hang many paintings.

Looking back afterwards, I understood that this brief period of such unsettled situation was one of causes I became completely absorbed in collecting contemporary Russian paintings, and I venture to tell this personal story here which has nothing to do with the paintings because I hope to touch a little how Russian art has influenced me personally.

I always think that art appreciation is a communication between the painting and the individual looking at it. This experience pertaining to the painting, however, simultaneously tells one aspect of the effect that the painting exerts on him who appreciates it. In contemporary Russian paintings, as I noted before, the impression changes subtly depending on the amount of light, distance and angle the piece is viewed from. Because it looks as if the painting spoke, the desire to view this picture is born anew each time, no matter how many times you look at it. So I even began to look forward to returning to my apartment, and when I was actually looking intently at the paintings there, I was drawn into the art world and was naturally comforted, feeling at ease. This served for a change I needed, and then I was able to set about some work or do some reading or thinking without problems. On top of the pleasure of appreciating contemporary Russian art, I can say that this secondary effect of the painting was extremely helpful to me.

That's why my passion for collecting art got a powerful boost on the occasion that I had overcome my feeling of isolation and almost every week on my days off, I went out to look at paintings. It was not easy to find the paintings I liked, but even so, with the passage of time, they were being collected one by one, setting off the room with their individualities. The deserted feeling in the apartment when I returned home was mitigated to a strange degree, and when I returned from work, first of all I would take a break in my apartment, looking at all the paintings one after one slowly as if I were

looking at the face of my children, which particularly became a great comfort for me.