

Iron Curtain lifts on love story here



NEPOMNYASCHY

Russian wins visa to marry American



Cathy Theimer in her 82d St. apartment after getting the news.

Post Photo by Vernon Shiba

By MARSHA KRANES

THE IRON CURTAIN between Vyacheslav Nepomnyaschy and Cathy Theimer is about to be lifted.

It's kept him in Siberia with the Soviet Army for two years, forced him to become a butcher instead of an engineer, and even led to two weeks in jail.

Now, he's planning the trip here to join his sweetheart on the West Side.

The 29-year-old Russian called his fiancée, who lives on W. 82d St., earlier this week with the good news and told an Associated Press reporter in Moscow yesterday that he hoped to fly to Vienna on Sunday on the first leg of his journey to the U. S.

"I must admit I don't think I totally believe it," said Miss Theimer, a graduate student at Columbia University, who met her Russian boy friend on a Black Sea beach six-and-a-half years ago when she was a 20-year-old exchange student.

"Slava and I never expected it to take this long," said the blond, brown-eyed Cathy.

★ ★ ★

After their romantic five-day seaside idyll in 1970, Cathy returned to the U.S. Two visits later—in 1971—they decided to marry. And that's when the Soviets dropped an Iron Curtain between them.

The Soviet bureaucracy — possibly prompted by Slava's father, a loyal Communist—saw to it that Cathy was repeatedly denied entry visas.

Slava himself was jailed during President Nixon's visit, drafted and stationed in Siberia and transferred from his engineering job to a construction crew, which he eventually left to become a butcher.

It was not until the summer of 1975—after three-and-a-half years of trying—that Cathy succeeded in getting into Russia. And she attributes her success to her anonymity within a large tour group.

During that brief visit, Cathy and Slava set a wedding date—Oct. 18, 1975. She never made it though. Her mother ended up in Moscow exchanging champagne toasts with Slava while the bride-to-be waited here in vain for her visa to come through.

★ ★ ★

Cathy isn't sure why her romance received so much attention from the Russians. "I have a number of friends married to Soviets. They met their spouses after I met Slava. It's hard to say why we've had so much difficulty. Our timing was bad, I guess. They apparently used us as a test case."

Then too, she noted, "Slava is probably not their average emigre. It's one thing to be a dissident writer, but they're not prepared for a young well-brought-up Communist engineer to want to leave the country."

Cathy emphasized that Slava "was never a member of the Communist party" although he did belong to—and quit—Komsomol, the Communist youth organization.

His father, though, is an active party

member who was violently opposed to his older son's marriage to an American.

While Cathy kept trying to get into Russia, Slava began pushing for an exit visa.

At first he met with no success. Then, in September, there was a thaw in the icy response he had been getting: "They told him he could leave if he got a letter from his parents," Cathy recalled.

It took two months for Slava, who had broken with his parents, to get the letter.

"First his father was away, then his mother was in the hospital . . ." But he got the letter. "His parents had had it; it was obvious it [our romance] wasn't going to end . . . and they thought it was better not to drag it out. They also believed Slava's younger brother was rejected from an institute because Slava was an unsavory person."

Once he had the letter, there was a long wait for a visa. "They weren't giving out visas in Moscow for two months—not until two weeks before New Year's."

And now he's on his way.

★ ★ ★

"He has to do a lot of running around to get his visa and his plane ticket. He has to get an Israeli visa, he can't get his American visa until he gets to Vienna . . . they know where he's heading, but they're playing a game that he's going to Israel," said Cathy.

She added that although Slava is part-Jewish, as the son of staunch Communists he had no religious training and has no feeling of religious identity. He is

getting an Israeli visa because it is his only way out of Russia.

Once in Vienna, Slava will be met by some friends, with whom he'll stay until his American visa is ready. And then, hopefully sometime next week, he'll head for New York.

"He's coming in on a fiance visa that's good for 90 days. When we're married, his status will change to permanent resident," said Cathy.

★ ★ ★

She hopes Slava will be able to get an extension of that visa. "My parents are leaving the country for three months and we'd like to wait until this summer and have a big wedding." The wedding will take place in the Presbyterian Church in Rumson, N.J. where her parents live.

Once here, Slava will move into Cathy's one-bedroom apartment, on West 82d Street and probably go back to school to study engineering.

Cathy, who's preparing for her Ph.D. exams in Russian literature at Columbia, is doing as much studying as she can before he gets here.

Will she recognize him after such a long separation? "Of course," she said of the 5-foot-10 blue-eyed Russian who "looks like Michael York."

But, she notes, he has changed. When she last saw him "he was relatively emaciated." But "from recent accounts, I gather he's stocky now."

His one advantage in being forced to be a butcher in Russia, she laughed, was that he was able to eat very well.