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# THE SPIRIT OF M · A · I · N · E

## Life On A Soviet Freighter



Rockland girls visit their friend Sasha aboard the Riga.

**S**HALKAV, a 31-year-old sailor, tells me, "My son is 4, my daughter is 8," indicating with gestures his son's smaller size. I am assisting his search for a car in the Boston Globe Classified section. He stops and retrieves a picture of his children from his bed, beaming proudly at his family. He hesitates, points to a calendar, and in broken English speaks, "We go to Boston, buy car, go home for the holiday..."

Once worlds apart, we're now embarking on a friendship right on the coast of Maine. The Soviet freighter Riga's journey's been as long as mine has been short. Her name is derived from the city of Riga,

capital of Latvia. Her home port is Murmansk, population 380,000, in the Soviet Republic. Owned by the Northern Cold Storage

Fishing Fleet of Murmansk, the Riga has a crew of 108 men and 8 women from the country villages and cities throughout the Republic. Men from Kiev, Riga, Minsk, Byansk, and Estonia flock to Murmansk to work on fishing vessels that fish the world's oceans. But wait... wasn't I in the United States this morning?

### **JOURNAL Entry. 7:10 a.m.**

Skimming into the fog in a Zodiac two miles off the coast of Rockland, I see a black ominous silhouette slowly beginning to take shape, like a magic mountain. Speeding closer, detail rushes toward me with a shock as the rusty fishing vessel looms over us, growing in apparent height as we approach. "Is that the ship?" I ask. "Yes," says the Zodiac pilot. "That is the Riga." Looking amidship I see her smokestack statuesquely reaching into the sky. Firmly imprinted on her stack, in deep rich colors of red and yellow, shimmers the hammer and sickle. My eyes involuntarily widen. Then I burst out laughing. To the rear of the vessel an U.S. fishing boat is unloading a Plymouth Horizon onto the Soviet ship. Dangling precariously



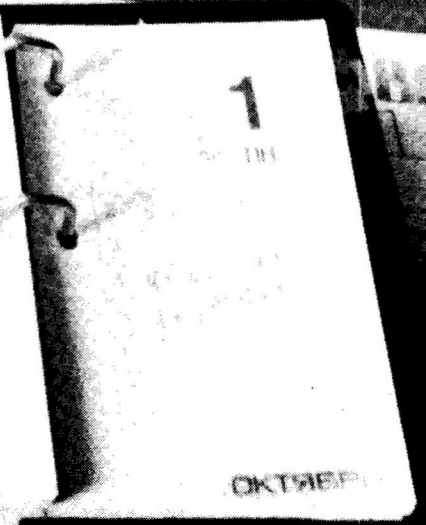


ЕВРО СТИМ

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|----|---|----|----|----|----|
| ПН | 1 | 8  | 15 | 22 | 29 |
| Вт | 2 | 9  | 16 | 23 | 30 |
| Ср | 3 | 10 | 17 | 24 | 31 |
| Чт | 4 | 11 | 18 | 25 |    |
| Пт | 5 | 12 | 19 | 26 |    |
| Сб | 6 | 13 | 20 | 27 |    |
| Вс | 7 | 14 | 21 | 28 |    |

ОКТЯБРЬ

1990



# SPIRIT

between the two pitching decks, it seems almost too symbolic an expression of the transfer of western theory and culture to the Soviets as *Perestroika* comes into reality. I look at the car and oddly hope that it has an automatic transmission...

## JOURNAL Entry. 7:37 a.m.

Background. The *Riga* and her crew have come to fish the waters off the Maine Coast. In a joint venture with Resource Trading Co. of Portland, the *Riga* purchases pogies from American fishermen, then processes the fish into fish meal and fish oil. The ship is automated and is capable of processing 20-30 tons of fish an hour.

Like U.S. fishing ships, she is a highly efficient killing machine poised far from home, the far flung end of the world. Throughout the autumn days and nights American fishing boats have come to the *Riga* to unload their catch. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

No leaves, no holidays, the crew has not been to shore in six months. How ironic—as I write some men play a game of Chinese Billiards on the deck of the ship, as if they are not in sight of land, and fewer than three miles away lies solid ground. *Amerika*. After a game of billiards I ask one of the players what he thinks of the North Atlantic Coast. He says he does not know, he has never been there, he continues on to ask me if there are beautiful mountains and trees there? The conversation struggles on in broken sentences, with many hand gestures. He likes European Football, which he plays daily on an enclosed deck. Baseball? Nine! he exclaims. He knows nothing about baseball.

**8:11 a.m.** Left alone, I am free to wander about the ship. My passage leads me to the Captain's Quarters. The door opens, I peer in, hello? No response. Entering I notice a photograph of Gorbachev on the wall. I approach to get a closer look. The photograph appears almost surrealistic. There is something odd about this picture. What is it? I peer even closer. Then, it appears to me, so obvious! No discolored birth mark!

**8:17 a.m.** Voices come from behind. I turn around, and surprising me as they enter the cabin is the Captain and Steve, who I learn is the only American who lives onboard. Steve is a Marine Biologist whose job

it is to sample the fish for disease and general health, as well as monitor the catch. The captain, shaking my hand firmly, says, "Hello, I am Vadim Khrulev, captain of the *Riga*." "Hello, I am Kevin, the first mate." A roar of laughter breaks out between the Captain and Steve. "OK, first mate," the Captain exclaims in laughter, "Have a seat, let's talk!" Dumbfounded I ask Steve what is so amusing. Steve explains that unlike American ships, the first mate aboard Soviet vessels is the political officer. His duty is to be the voice of Moscow to all foreign companies and governments. We settle in and talk some more...

**11:41 a.m.** Up on deck I am talking to Khrulev,



who is explaining the *Riga* to me. Built in 1958, the *Riga* can hold 750 metric tons of fish oil; it produces 90 metric tons of oil in one day. In the two and one half months of fishing the *Riga* has produced more than 350,000 metric tons of fish oil. "What is the meal and fish oil for?" I ask. "Pogies are quite rich in protein, which makes an excellent nutritional additive for animals, particularly chickens and cattle." He continues on to tell me that, when refined, fish oil makes a high grade oil for use in fine machinery. Khrulev claims that the Soviet Union exports much of the oil from Murmansk to Norway and other European countries. There the fish oil is used as a food additive in margarine, as an ingredient in the production of cosmetics such as lipstick, and also as a vitamin supplement.

This is Khrulev's first year as commander of the *Riga*. The trip has been what he refers to as "refreshing." Ordinarily his assignment brings him off the Spanish Sahara Coast in Africa, fishing for sardines. "Not a pleasant time," he says. "Fishing is often difficult." "Is it hot?" I ask. "Yes, the civil war there is hot, the sun is too." We laugh.

*Continued next page*

## A Portland Index Most popular book

at Raffles: *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

Bus fare at Metro: 80 cents

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Number of nurses working in Maine Medical Center: More than 800

Number of Lawyers in Portland: Over 800

Number of years Recordland has been in business: 33

Number of years Grippo's Shoe Repair has been in business: 40

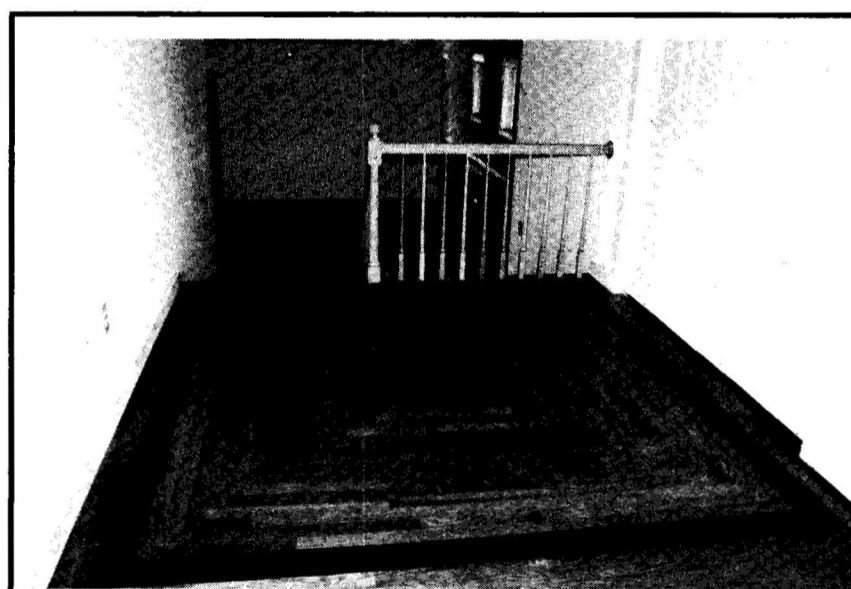
Number of years Central Yarn has been in business: 41

Number of years Tommy's Delicatessen has been in business: 13

Earliest bus to Boston: C&J Trailways, 16 Forest Avenue. Bus departs at 5:45 a.m.

Sources: Raffles, Metro Station, Maine Medical Center, Maine Law Review, C&J Trailways.

*Compiled By Frederick Schwartz*



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At school the captain learned both English and German. German is easier for him. Proudly he continues, "My daughter, she is 12. She has learned English in school. She is talented in music and art. I have many hopes for her. My son is 7. He will learn English this year in the first grade." Khrulev stops our conversation, turns to open the top drawer of his desk, and takes out a photograph of himself with his wife and children poised behind a small, cartoon-like statue. He goes on to tell me that this picture was taken on Constitution Day. In the background of the photo lies the greenery of a small park. In the distance stands a plain concrete stucco apartment building. Khrulev tells me that they once celebrated this holiday in October, but that the constitution only lasted for one year; now this place is nothing.

"What was your first impression of Americans?" I ask. "Normal," he says. "I have fished the sea for 16 years and traveled in 29 countries. Americans here are the same as Americans overseas. Friendly, normal, behave like they should, civilized." I ask, "Have you ever visited America?" "Yes, one time we visited Portland." "How were you greeted?" "Normal. I was not spooked by the Americans, and they were not spooked by me. I liked the visit to Portland's City Council meeting most. I like the way I was received, and how friendly the people were to each other. I like the rituals that were involved with the meeting. The people were very serious, honor their flag, and allegiance to the government. The meeting is designed to make you feel that the decisions made are right and just. The people don't look as if they are tired, or bored of the process. Nothing like this happens in my homeland. In Russia, I have never been to a political meeting. In Russia, people do not feel this way..." Khrulev then becomes guarded, and seems somewhat reluctant to discuss his thoughts openly...

**1:51 p.m.** As if he is aware of his captain's awkwardness, a sailor calls out in Russian, "Has the Geiger



counter arrived?" "Ya," replies the Captain, "and it has been calibrated, too." "Why the Geiger counter?" I ask. "The captain of the transport ship from Russia is concerned that their meat is radioactive because the beef came from an area near Chernobyl," I am told...

**2:24 p.m.** The people on the ship are in exceptional physical condition. Their physique is attributed to the hard labor and diet. Their menu is high in starch, carbohydrates  
*Continued on page 42*

**Alexander plays  
a love ballad on his "harmonica."**

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## Soviet Freighter

*Continued from page 15*

and protein. Yogurt, meat, and tons of potatoes are the basic staples of their meals. Round this out with Ox Tail Soup, bread, and tea. Evidence of their yogurt intake is everywhere—empty containers are used as drinking glasses, pencil holders, and storage containers...

**4:49 p.m.** When they aren't wearing their universal fish processing coveralls, they dress quite differently. Mikal, the deck officer, is dressed in American clothing—a polo shirt, khaki trousers, docksider shoes, and Ray Ban sunglasses. If it were not for his Russian accent, Mikal would easily be mistaken for an American preppy. In contrast, Shalkav is all 1960s—black jacket, cigarette, Eurobeat "Unbearable Lightness of Being" attire. With Russian music serenading us in the background, we talk and exchange trinkets. I end up with Soviet cigarettes, a curious red and white package with, yes, a Soviet Surgeon General's warning on the side! Seems *they're* all trying to quit, too. Mikal can watch both American and Russian television. Back home he listens to the BBC and Radio Free Europe. Before *Perestroika*, he says, Moscow radio did not tell the news the same as the BBC, but now "There is no difference." "What do you have to look forward to when you get home?" I ask him. "Nothing," he replies. "Very bad, no money. Chut, chut, a little bit I have here," he says. He then pulls out a paper ruble. "Here," he says, "a gift for you." With reluctance I accept. He explains that a ruble's worth depends on who you trade with. One U.S. dollar can buy from 60 to 2,000 rubles.

"Do you practice religion?" I ask. "No, Communist," Mikal answers. "No problem." Then he reaches under his shirt and shows me a silver cross. It is the Eucharist cross, the symbol of Orthodox Catholicism. "You are Christian," I repeat. "No, Communist," he responds. Just then a slender, somewhat meek man approaches and begins speaking to Shalkav. "This is Dr. Kememovov Dmitmi, the ship's dentist. Come, he welcomes you to his cabin for a visit," Shalkav says.



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**5:42 p.m.** Kememovov was educated as a dentist in Leningrad, where he now lives with his wife Natili. As the ship's dentist Kememovov is equipped to perform minor surgery, but he finds himself generally involved with cleaning and filling cavities. Many of the Russian men have gold teeth. Why? Kememovov explains that filling teeth with gold is no longer done, but some men do have their teeth capped with the gold from their wedding bands, though the practice is fading. Today, men who cap their teeth in gold are considered behind the times, bumpkins...

**6:15 p.m.** Standing on deck looking out I hear a hello from behind me. Peering out a cabin window is a bearded man smiling broadly, his gold tooth glimmering in the sunlight. "Hello, my name is Alexander. You are a journalist..."

**6:21 p.m.** Alexander is a machinist, from a village on the Ukrainian/Russian border. "Come, come see my shop." We rush through narrow corridors and down a steep stairwell into the belly of the ship. He opens a heavy steel door into a dark enclosure and slaps the tops of giant metal objects. "I fix them," he indicates with considerable background gesturing. "Russian computers!" he says, and then laughs at his joke. "Let's go and dance," he says to my surprise. Back in his cabin he picks up an accordion and it makes a sound I've never heard from an accordion before. U.S. players are jerky, showy. This is a cooing sound, wonderfully charming and understated, with a distinct cultural flavor. I stare at the invisible music coming from his arms. He is playing from the heart, I conclude...

**6:29 p.m.** Then he stops. "My harmonica!" he proclaims. People surround and start to cheer. One by one each man takes center stage to dance, amid more cheers. One dancer challenges another, and another. Everyone is dancing. The small stateroom is getting hotter and hotter and the laughter more robust in the cold Soviet freighter that inspired so much fear along the Maine coast for so many years... □

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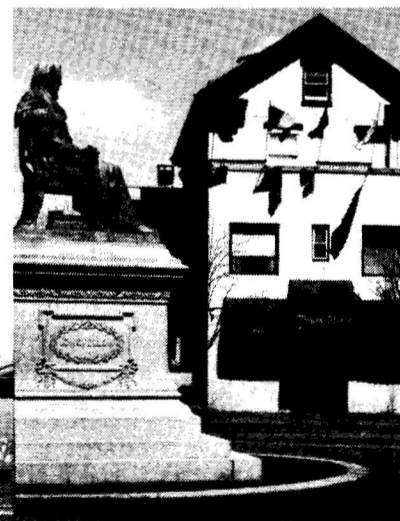
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