WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE RUSSIANS

(Continued from Page 38)

[illegible] Krichevski, a Military Government [illegible] I knew to be [illegible] the rank of Soviet Army [illegible] who defected from their eastern [illegible]. Assuming an air of [illegible] a great deal more than I did, I [illegible] Dora. "What's all this about a Russian [illegible] a journal of [illegible]?"

"[illegible] Dora," said Dora, "[illegible] don't write about it yet—not [illegible] we're [illegible] interview each."

"Agreed." [illegible] said Dora in the [illegible] story of the prisoner [illegible] said how [illegible] in American [illegible] custody.

The Soviet target was a group of [illegible] Army officers who were living [illegible] Krichevski in a [illegible] on leave to the American-occupied [illegible] of the city, pending their [illegible] for Western Germany. The [illegible] defections from the communists [illegible] two years. The most important defection was a handsome [illegible] Soviet engineer officer and a [illegible] civilian—who not only knew [illegible] and transportation centers [illegible] in Germany but [illegible] proven. Obviously, the Soviet authorities would not [illegible] the flow of information [illegible] to us.

"And they [illegible] never succeeded, [illegible]," Krichevski observed. "They had [illegible] planted in the house, so they [illegible] a time when I was away and [illegible] was clear. If it hadn't been [illegible] Rita (Krichevski's pretty wife) the [illegible] might have worked."

Strange as it seems, to Americans [illegible] was instantaneously attached to [illegible] house. This sort of [illegible] naturally simplifies things for the Russians.

According to the facts brought out in the official investigation, the prisoner had been mixed in with the civilians for Monday-morning breakfast. The latter, one of the civilians and the Soviet engineer officer, [illegible] the civilian to [illegible] [illegible]. They met the civilian back. But the rest of the group are at least part of their [illegible]. The biggest helping was given by a robust, black-haired servant from the Caucasus. The distribution of the poison had been crudely done and the unfortunate servant with the keen appetite [illegible] to [illegible] a heavily dosed portion. As a result, he remains paralyzed today from the waist down.

The servant, naturally enough, was the first to get sick. Within an hour, he was retching violently. This caused the Soviet engineer and the civilian officials to become even more firmly convinced that Soviet terrorists were engaged in a poisoning operation. Rita, who had seen enough to learn quite a little about Russian tactics, agreed to tell the American military police.

Unfortunately, the military policeman who turned up was a new young fellow Western boy new to the world world of Berlin. He assured Rita that he was just "imagining things," and that the sickness was "probably just a case of poisoning poisoning." But he consented to take the victims over to the 298th for a checkup and to bring them back in the evening.

At the hospital, the Soviet officers were given routine stomach pump treatment for food poisoning, then returned to the house. The military police left Rita's home to the extent of ordering special patrols to watch the house during the night. But all was quiet. The next morning the military police were here to tell Rita that Rita had been imagining things. So these young noncoms at the group of his customs intrigue felt justified in pulling off the patrols.

But no sooner Rita had confided her husband in Moscow with her report of the poisoning Krichevski's new house immediately. Telephone and cameras, Krichevski returned late Tuesday afternoon, some thirty hours after the poison had been eaten by the servants.

According to our Intelligence authorities, there had been several unofficial reports of a strange poison used by the Soviet [illegible] and by communists in Eastern Europe. "We had been told," Krichevski said, "that the Soviets sometimes used a narcotic which deprived the victims of any will of their own, and which at the same time enabled them to perform physical feats beyond the capabilities of a normal person."

Rita first took her husband to see one of the Soviet women who had been having a particularly bad time. When they entered, the woman was asleep.

Krichevski recounted the scene this way: "She answered questions sensibly enough in normal conversation, but her responses were slow. Her eyes were glazed. I decided to try an experiment. In a loud, commanding tone of voice, I told her to get out of bed, stand up and touch her forehead to her toes. Now, as you know, that's an extraordinarily difficult feat for any adult. Nevertheless she got out of bed, and, in an awkward, [illegible] way, bent over and touched her forehead to the floor."

When Krichevski found that other poison victims responded to orders in the same [illegible] manner, he concluded that it must be the same type of narcotic reportedly used by the Russians. And, more important, it was also clear that anyone under the effect of such a narcotic would unquestionably [illegible] orders of any would-be kidnapers who could gain access to the room of [illegible].

Fearful of the skepticism of the American military police, Krichevski decided to take what precautions he could on his own. First, he assembled all the Soviet officers and put them in the second-story dining room, in the dead center of the house. Krichevski himself placed his mattress—and his gun—near the window of the bedroom normally occupied by the Soviet civilian technician and the sergeant. Then he sat down to wait for what he was pretty sure would come.

As Krichevski tells it: "I hadn't had any sleep for a couple of days and I guess I dropped off. I was awakened by the barking of my female boxer. I could see a man on the drainpipe exactly at my door level and just one window away. I aimed and kept on firing. He slid down the drainpipe and stumbled across the field to the road. One of those big old-fashioned German cars was waiting for him. There were two men in it."

Krichevski had the satisfaction of finally convincing the skeptics. Berlin had just had one of its comparatively heavy snows. The raider's footprints were clearly outlined. A trail of blood showed that he had been hit.

The final chapter of the fantastic episode was to identify the agent who actually had done the poisoning. It was an obvious suspect, a pretty White Russian girl named Bettina, who had interviewed on an occasional basis Krichevski's colleagues. She had been recommended by a White Russian priest in one of Berlin's refugee camps. She had also won the confidence of officers among Krichevski's colleagues.

Rita had become suspicious of Katrina the morning of the poisoning, because of the frantic haste with which she disposed of the platitude of cereal which the Soviet engineer and his civilian had sent back to the kitchen. Yet, with the American authorities convinced at the time that the whole affair was nothing but poisoning poisoning, there was little Rita could do when on Tuesday morning, Katrina asked to be allowed to return to the refugee camp and pick up some things. Katrina naturally never showed up again at either place.

There theres convinced the American authorities that Katrina was almost certainly a Soviet agent. The most important was that our own informers later positively identified Katrina as working at Karlshorst, the Soviet headquarters in Berlin's suburbs. Secondly, a search of her room turned up two candles, one long and one short, with which she could have signaled the would-be kidnapers on Monday, warning them to stay away because of the military-police patrols. Finally, when she departed, ostensibly for the refugee camp, she left behind her most of her worldly possessions and never attempted to call for them.

After Krichevski's encounter with the raider on the drainpipe, the pendulum of official interest in the poisoning incident swung violently. High-level officials demanded action, and a thorough investigation followed.

The day after the shooting, the Soviet poison victims were rushed back to the hospital to see if any trace of the poison could be recovered. It was far too late. A small sampling, however, was taken from the stomach of one of the two boxers belonging to the Krichevskis. The male dog died after eating the cereal. Oddly enough, even this tampering "disappeared" between Berlin and American Intelligence headquarters at Heidelberg, where it was being sent for analysis.

The moral of this tale is, whenever the Russians are concerned don't dismiss anything just because it seems too fantastic to be true.

The Berlin poisoning case is merely one of many such unpleasant incidents which filled my memorandum file in 1948 and 1949. It has not always been so. For, in the early days of the occupation of Germany, many Russians, as well as Americans, swimmed warm in by the glowing communiques that emanated from the international conferences. In fact, my first encounter with a citizen of the proletarian dictatorship was a very lucky one for me. I recorded the details in a memorandum dated August 7, 1945. Here is the memo, incidentally the first entry in my file on the Russians:

"Been hearing a lot of jokes about crude Russian equipment and the primitive nature of their methods. But when the mechanical age lets you down, these primitive means can be lifesavers—as I found out last night.

"Drew Middleton, correspondent of The New York Times, and I were motoring to cover an assignment when our tire went flat on the autobahn at a point in the Soviet Zone, about twenty miles west of Berlin. (The city of Berlin sits about 100 miles behind Russia's line.) Out in no Germany. This trip to Berlin was my first into Soviet-held territory. It was getting dark. And because of the [illegible] brown, the strange place [illegible] creepy. I didn't feel any more comfortable when our tire went [illegible] crumpled and [illegible] stop while Middleton and I [illegible] model of our time-honored [illegible].

"The few American cars and [illegible] that whizzed by refused to recognize our distress signals. Perhaps one reason was that my car was a [illegible] make—a little German sports job [illegible] had once belonged to Nazi Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop.

"After about a half an hour of [illegible] signaling, I walked a few [illegible] feet to an Autobahn turnout, where I managed to stop a [illegible] cars. In it were two [illegible] and a plump woman surrounded by baggage. This wasn't an [illegible] crew, but I was too desperate by [illegible] to pass up any chance of help.

"'Auto *kaput*. Have you a [illegible]' I said in halting German, attempting at the same time to describe the [illegible] gesture.

"The Soviet officer in the driver's seat—a major—now got out of the car. After watching with obvious [illegible] ment my [illegible] he countered in French, with, 'Perhaps, by chance, madame speaks French?'

"What a relief! Madame did speak French. So it seemed that the problem was solved.

"But, as it turned out, the Soviet officer had no jack either. He had a solution, though. He stopped a total of three big Russian trucks and ordered the crews—some seven dirty and rough-looking enlisted men—to help us. Our curious caravan proceeded on foot down the road to my car. Here the Russian major asked the astonished Middleton to remember the tire-changing task. Then the Russian officer told the soldiers to pick up the front of the car and hold it. They strained under the weight of that car for at least two minutes and then the tire was changed. Hooray for primitive methods!"

The Berlin I visited in August, 1945, was wide open—at least for a few weeks. We Americans were taking over our sector of Berlin. It was apparent that many Soviet soldiers still occupied the entire city there to capitulate. American newsmen, for their part, wandered pretty freely through the Soviet sector. I remember going with Howard Kim, then chief of the New York Herald Tribune Berlin bureau, to a Soviet officers' club. We invaded it with a [illegible] returning to our own press camp loaded with tins of caviar, gifts from our surprised but generous hosts, as well as with $100 worth of Reichsmarks which Kim Hill obtained through the sale of a twenty-dollar watch to a Soviet captain. I also remember that only two days later Martha Gellhorn, the noted author, and Charles Collingwood, of CBS, were arrested and held seven hours at a Soviet headquarters for attempting to visit the same club.

Soon after my arrival in Berlin, I heard reports that the Russian occupation officials had been ordered to avoid all social contacts with Westerners when such meetings were not approved in advance. About the same time a Russian acquaintance, who used to purchase caviar for me in the Soviet "commissary," or post exchange, sent a frantic note asking urgent to interview he other any more, because of Lord, he might be sent back to Russia on charges of fraternization with the West.

Despite these disappointing developments, I returned from the Nuremberg