

### *Adam the Hippie*

In one of the five-storey apartment buildings in my neighbourhood there lived a hippie who went by the name of Adam. The nickname, which came from his surname of Adamovich, just sort of stuck to him. He lived on the ground floor in a two-room apartment with his grandmother, who was about a hundred years old, or so it seemed to us at the time. The old lady was as wrinkled as a dried-up apple, all hunch-backed and crooked, but lively as anything. She was exactly as I used to imagine Baba Yaga when I was little. But, let's get back to Adam. There were two things about him that set him apart from everyone else. He had a knobby cane fashioned from a branch with which he would not be parted. He also had the longest hair that I'd ever seen. He carried the cane because he'd fallen out of a tree as a child and broken both legs. The fractures had healed, but one leg remained shorter than the other. This is the reason why Adam had never served in the army, and, it was also why he could get away with almost anything. He could grow his hair as long as he wanted, without any dire consequences, and he could also go around in jeans that had patch upon patch on them. He wore genuine American jeans. All of the kids from the neighbouring Khrushchev-style apartment buildings envied Adam

because he looked so much like our vision of a hippie. I was also envious of him, because if I'd looked like him, I'd have been a hit in any beat group just standing there holding a guitar. I wouldn't even have to play it.

Adam couldn't play a single musical instrument, but he did love music and he understood it. He had a reel-to-reel tape recorder and at least a hundred tapes. In our neighbourhood, he was considered to be the undisputed expert on all Western groups, of every musical persuasion. It was from him that I first learned that George Harrison's Concert for Bangladesh had taken place not in Bangladesh, as we had all thought, but in New York City. Adam was a few years older than me, so of course he couldn't be my friend, but he didn't tell me to get lost either whenever I happened to drop in on him during the evening to listen to music. It was all the same to me what tape he had on. I slipped quietly into his room and sat down in the corner, glad that no one paid any attention to me. The door to his apartment was never closed, not even for a minute. All of the neighbourhood hippies, who were friends of Adam's, would be drawn there by the sound of his tape recorder. These hippies, in contrast to their brothers in the West, worked at various trades or else as stock boys in grocery stores, and only donned their hippie apparel by night. According to Soviet law, anyone who was eighteen or older, that is, an adult, had to either work or else continue their education. The hippies didn't opt to go on with their education, since they wouldn't have been allowed to keep their hair long at school. Soviet hippies preferred to work, giving up an education for the sake of preserving their image, or, in other words, for the sake of their hair. The first hippies appeared in my city sometime in the early 70's. Maybe they were around even earlier. I don't know, I never saw any. They were probably around, but it took time to grow their hair long enough. And what kind of hippies would they have been, anyway, without long hair? I remember quite clearly that I saw my first hippie, with long hair, jeans and a jean jacket, during the summer of 1971. He was walking down our street, arm-in-arm with a girl who was dripping with beads. Young teenagers

immediately took to the hippies. The older generation wasn't overfond of them, considering them to be not quite right in the head, with an inexplicable Western bent. To the police, they became an undesirable part of the scenery from the very beginning, ruining what were otherwise impeccable Soviet streets. The military registration and enlistment offices hated them outright. The hippies refused to join the army, citing anti-war convictions. As far as the military was concerned, these convictions had been invented with one goal in mind, and that was to avoid going into the army. The hippies then chose to employ different tactics, and instead of being pacifists, they became mentally ill. But, it's not like they made themselves out to be completely hopeless cases or anything. They only pretended to have slight health problems, the most popular of which was nocturia. When a hippie complaining of such an illness was admitted to the hospital for observation, he would spend his days singing about how it never rained in Southern California. At night, suffering from jealousy directed towards his American confreres for all of their reputed freedom, he would wet his bed. A month later, the hippie would leave the hospital with a white ticket, that is, a document exempting him from military service. In hippie parlance, this piece of paper was known as the "California Dream".

Hippies in the West used drugs, but Soviet hippies... well, I don't know, I'm not prepared to be the judge, but I never saw any of our local hippies taking them. I know for a fact that they sniffed glue, and I remember them inhaling deeply from a bottle containing a stain-remover called "Sopols", but, for the most part, they preferred a cheap, strong wine known as "chernilo", which translates into "ink" in English. Whenever pay day rolled around for the hippies, the table in Adam's room would literally be covered with bottles of "chernilo". The hippies would sit around the table, shooting the breeze. Sometimes, though, they'd sink into a blue funk — I guess the "chernilo" just didn't do it for them anymore. I mean, it didn't take them far enough out of their daily grind into a daydream world — and at times like these, they'd all begin to softly sing the well-known hymn of the Soviet hippies:

“Oh we hippies can't get far,  
Just can't live in the USSR,  
Nobody understands us, no,  
They kick us out wherever we go.  
There's just no truth, we know it well,  
So we give up dreaming in this hell...”

Generally speaking, though, the mood was pretty upbeat at Adam's place. New and interesting people kept showing up. I would sit in the corner listening to music, and not only did I not drink any of their wine, I never even added my two cents' worth to their conversations. I was shy because I felt I couldn't contribute anything to what was being discussed, and didn't dare open my mouth. I was just grateful that they didn't kick me out of there. Meanwhile, an album like *RAM* might be playing and they'd be talking about how it had been recorded. They considered Paul to be the most versatile of all the Beatles, musically speaking, although John was the band's heavyweight. But they never argued about who was the most important Beatle. Adam put it to them this way, ending all discussion on the matter once and for all: “A car might have front-wheel drive, but it still rides on all four”.

I thought of being at Adam's place as sort of going for my “evening music lessons”. Sometimes the hippies would leave the room for something, and I ended up alone. On these occasions, if the tape happened to be over and they still hadn't come back in, I got to pick the next tape. Adam's grandmother took advantage of these moments to scurry into the room, carrying an enormous mug. She'd get a bottle from the table and motion for me to have a drink. I always refused. “OK, then, I guess I'll have to drink alone”, she would say hurriedly. “To your health, sonny!”, she winked at me, filling up her mug, which could hold an entire bottle, and beating a hasty retreat. The hippies would come back into the room, look at me, then at the empty bottle, then back at me, and although I was the only one there, they never said anything. They just opened up another bottle and placed the empty one under the table.

As far as I could tell, Adam didn't have any parents. I never asked him about it. It suited everyone just fine that Adam lived with his grandmother, who didn't limit his freedom one bit. It meant that Adam had his own room, and a room of one's own, without any parents to watch over you, was a big deal, let me tell you. It was the only place in our entire neighbourhood where you could relax and get away from your parents' and the public's watchful eye. Although, a shadow was cast over our freedom from time to time by the local cop on the beat. Once or twice a week he'd carry out something akin to a raid during the evenings. He'd show up and chase everyone off, because, as he would put it, there were "illegal anti-Soviet drunken parties" going on in the apartment. "And, I suppose the legal, Soviet ones take place only on November 7 and May 1", Adam would snap back at him. "How do you know that drunken parties are anti-Soviet? Maybe we're drinking in protest of the Vietnam war?" The cop didn't buy Adam's Vietnam story, and remained firm in his resolve to wipe out the "den of hippies" in his district. It was a good thing that Adam lived on the ground floor and the hippies could take off through the window when they heard the cop knocking at the door, only to return once he'd gone away. Once, however, he showed up with a whole gang of volunteer policemen, whom he stationed beneath Adam's window. All of the hippies were taken off to the police station. They didn't touch me, though. The grandmother told them that I was just a neighbourhood kid who'd dropped in to borrow some sugar. "Fine, but if I see you here again I'll call your school," threatened the cop.

The next day everyone would be back again. There I was once more, sitting in the corner watching the tape going round and round, soaking up those magical sounds. Once, one of the hippies brought a tape that he'd made from a Voice of America musical broadcast. There was a song called "*American Woman*". We all liked it a lot, even though the only words we could make out were "American Woman". The hippie that had brought the tape explained that the song was about a guy that didn't want Vietnamese women, but only his own, American women. Judging by his translation, the song

was clearly anti-war. "He's right", said Adam. "I want an American woman too. As far as the war in Vietnam is concerned, well, of course it's bad. But I'm on the American side. I mean, after all, they're fighting against Communism." And I thought "Our hippies aren't at all like American ones. American hippies curse their government openly, while ours can be thrown in jail for uttering a single word. American hippies don't work, ours work their butts off. Americans take any kind of drug they want, our hippies drink 'chernilo', and not even whenever they want, at that. But the thing that baffled me most was that while both the American hippies and ours were pacifists, they viewed the Vietnam war differently."

Adam's luck ran out after the Dooley Family concert. This British family group gave concerts all over the Soviet Union. In our city, they performed at the sports centre. Although the centre could hold three-and-a-half thousand spectators, I still couldn't get a ticket. Those of my classmates who'd been lucky enough to go to the concert, were just ecstatic as they described the experience to the rest of us. This is what happened. After performing a few English folk songs, the Dooleys sang *Back In the USSR*. Everyone sitting at the back jumped up and surged towards the stage. The police cordon did their best to maintain order. Adam was among the spectators. Despite his limp, he was in one of the first few rows of young people pressing against the police cordon. Adam was singing along with the Dooleys and swinging his cane in time to the music. The police tried to take the cane away from him, but Adam wouldn't let them. Then the police tried to knock some sense into him with their clubs. Adam immediately turned his cane into a sword and, amidst all of the pushing and shoving, he began fencing with the cops. As a result, Adam was tried under the classic Soviet article of "petty hooliganism" and he spent fifteen nights in jail, working with a street-sweeping crew during the day, under the watchful eye of the police. The worst part of it was that they shaved his head, and he wouldn't leave his apartment for half a year after he came home. What I missed was his tape collection, which the police had confiscated. They'd found one with a Voice of America announcer

speaking on it, and therefore the cassettes couldn't be returned to Adam because they contained anti-Soviet material. We were all afraid that Adam might get far worse than a fifteen day sentence for this, but his grandmother told the local cop that they were her tapes. She even went so far as to go to the police station to ask them to give her back her music. Another unpleasant consequence for me was the fact that my mother, after learning of this incident, wasn't all that enthusiastic anymore about buying me the tape recorder that I'd almost managed to convince her to get on credit.