CITIZEN DIPLOMATS

PATHFINDERS IN SOVIET-AMERICAN RELATIONS—AND HOW YOU CAN JOIN THEM

GALE WARNER and MICHAEL SHUMAN

Foreword by Carl Sagan

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CHAPTER TWO

A SUMMIT MEETING: CYNTHIA LAZAROFF

Cynthia Lazaroff concentrated on taking one step at a time. The sun had just topped the ragged crest of the Caucasus Mountains, bringing little warmth, but transforming the icy, rounded shoulders of Mt. Elbrus, the highest peak in Europe, into a painfully brilliant expanse of white. Each effort to place one foot ahead of the other seemed to go against all instinct and reason. Each breath required an uncanny deliberateness. And she still had more than two thousand feet to climb.

Behind and ahead of her were the anonymous figures of the Soviet and American teenagers she had led to this point, their shapes obscured by gaudy padded jackets, their faces covered by balaclavas and glacier glasses, their noses pure white with protective cream. By her side was the head Soviet guide, Slava Volkov, who gauged his pace so that at every moment his body sheltered Lazaroff from the wind.

Her mind, she realized groggily, was numb. She had imagined, planned, and worked for this day for nearly five years, and now that it was here she found herself curiously emotionless, almost bored by the unending vista of ice, the necessity of sinking her crampons into the snow again and again. From below, each pile of rocks or slightly rounded hump looked cruelly like the summit, sparking irrational hopes that they were nearly there. Each time a minor crest was gained, a new horizon of implacable ice stretched before them.

Then, ahead of her, Cynthia Lararoff saw a Soviet girl and an American girl link arms, put their heads down against the wind, and move up the mountain with their steps in perfect unison. She remembered, through the haziness of oxygen deprivation at sixteen thousand feet, why she had taken so many steps already, and why she would take many more.

* * *

Cynthia Lazaroff is a slim, petite woman with blue eyes, curly blond ringlets, and dark eyebrows that hint at her Slavic ancestry. The office of the US-USSR Youth Exchange Program, which she founded and directs, occupies the ground floor of a gray stucco house in a quiet neighborhood of San Francisco. She wears a blue sweater, a string of pearls, and a plum-colored down vest; her favorite colors are lavender, pink, and blue. There is a refreshing, unassuming femininity to her office and her materials, revealed in small ways, such as her powder-blue stationery with its calligraphied letterhead, the doodled designs of flowers on her brochures, and the Russian *matrioshka* dolls tucked between videotapes and books on her shelves.

Lazaroff cannot count the times American experts in Soviet affairs patted her on the head patronizingly when she first told them her plans for the US-USSR Youth Exchange Program. Most said, "Nice idea, honey, but it will never happen." Their pessimism, she thinks, had something to do with her own youth (she is now twenty-nine), her height (five foot one) and her sex. "People say I look like a cute little girl, and it's hard to be taken seriously in this field as a woman," she says in a firm, musical voice, her large delicate earrings catching the light as she nods her head for emphasis.

Although she often hires men as consultants, her office is staffed entirely by women. A woman gave her program its first major grant. Almost half of her advisory board members are women, a significant number in view of the preponderance of men in foreign affairs in general and Soviet-American relations in particular. It is almost too predictable that women should run a program that focuses on children and education. But Lazaroff negotiates, fund-raises, administers, and organizes within a world of men. She often works with officials of the Soviet Sports Committee, an organization with little predisposition to things feminine.

When Cynthia Lazaroff was seven years old, she saw a picture of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow, with its fantastical, swirling domes, on the cover of a *National Geographic* student bulletin. She announced to her parents that someday she would go to the Soviet Union and see it for herself. "It was so mysterious and magnificent," she recalls. Her parents smiled and patted her on the head, but they didn't tell her it was impossible.

Lazaroff was exposed to the Slavic tradition at a young age by her father's parents, who emigrated from a tiny peasant village in Macedonia, in what is now Yugoslavia. "I went with them to their church, I did a

lot of Macedonian folk-dancing, and I developed a feel for their language, which is similar to Russian," she says. When she was a senior in high school, she overheard a friend of her family, a history professor, remark that the two most important languages to learn in the twentieth century are Russian and Chinese. Lazaroff decided that she would learn both. The summer before leaving for Mt. Holyoke College, she bought a Berlitz book and started studying Russian on her own.

During her freshman year at Mt. Holyoke, Lazaroff took several political science courses from an inspiring professor, Ruth Lawson, who encouraged her to make Soviet-American relations her field. But Lazaroff soon tired of commuting to another college to take Russian language courses, and Professor Lawson was retiring that year. Intrigued by Princeton professor Richard Falk's studies of world order and international affairs, she decided to transfer to Princeton University, which had excellent departments of political science and Russian.

It was a big step for a little girl from Pittsburgh, she recalls. "I came from a high school where my guidance counselor said, 'Who do you think you are?' when I said I was applying to Mt. Holyoke." Princeton's application deadline had already passed, and an admissions officer told her she had no chance of being accepted. "But there are times when you just know something is right for you," she remembers. "I pushed and pushed. And finally they agreed to look at my application if I sent it Federal Express." She got in.

Lazaroff studied Russian and international affairs intensively at Princeton for more than a year. (She now says that studying Chinese will be her "after-age-forty" project.) In autumn 1978 she went to the Soviet Union for the first time to study for four months at Leningrad University as part of a student exchange program.

Her semester did not begin auspiciously. Her dorm room, which she shared with three other Americans and a Soviet, was located in a prerevolutionary brothel. The food was abysmal, and Lazaroff, a vegetarian, had to subsist on potatoes and overcooked cabbage. It was the coldest winter since 1941, with temperatures dropping to forty below zero. The winter sun rose at 11 A.M. and set at 3:30 P.M. And her Soviet roommate was the Komsomol (Young Communist League) leader for the entire university, a young woman wary of foreigners, one of whose responsibilities was to write a weekly report on Lazaroff's activities. "The relationship between her and my American roommates and me basically consisted of her saying every time we left, 'Where are you going?' and

every time we came back, 'Where have you been?' We got into a standard routine where we would always say, 'I got so drunk last night I can't remember,' and as long as she asked the question and as long as we gave her that answer, she had done her job and we had done ours!"

But some of the drawbacks to dormitory living turned into opportunities. Since the showers worked only sporadically, Lazaroff and her friends began going to the *banya* (public baths) to get clean. The *banya*, a time-honored Russian tradition, was the center of a lively social scene. Dozens of women of all ages, including ancient babushkas and young girls, crowded into the steamy saunas of the women's *banya*. In dimly lit wooden rooms, the women traded stories and jokes while occasionally someone took a long stick with a pail on the end and poured water on the coals in a wall stove. For a few kopeks, Lazaroff and the other women could buy freshly cut birch branches and use them to swat one another playfully to improve blood circulation. Once thoroughly steamed, the women jumped into a cold shower or pool. Naked elderly women often handed Lazaroff stiff sponges and asked her to wash their backs. The good-humored, relaxed, celebratory atmosphere of the *banya* showed her a side of Soviet life very different from her uptight roommate and drab dorm room.

Before leaving the United States, Lazaroff had collected addresses of Soviet people from friends and decided that "the least important aspect" of her time there was her classes. "I wanted to try to really find out what life was like for Russians," she recalls. She visited numerous homes, made several friends, and started getting invited to parties where she was the only American present. Once, some Soviet students cajoled her into going to a party in a log cabin in a wooded area outside of the thirty-mile limit for foreigners. They dressed her in Soviet clothes and forbade her to say a word, even in Russian, in case her accent gave her away. "All I was allowed to say in public was *da* and *nyet*," she remembers. "We ate *bliny* and drank Georgian moonshine in front of the fire and stayed up partying and playing in the snow. But then the next day in a grocery store some big husky guy came up to me and started talking, and I had to pretend that I was deaf and didn't understand."

One day a Soviet friend took her to the apartment of a young couple in their twenties, both artists, who lived with their baby son and a grandmother. Lazaroff remembers feeling as if she had walked into a comfortable Soho flat in New York City—Simon and Garfunkel's "Scarborough Fair" was playing on a stereo and smells of delicious vegetarian cooking wafted through the apartment, which contained a hand-built

loft. Beautiful, somber oil portraits and country landscapes hung on every wall of the room, which had a marble fireplace and large windows overlooking a park. Pre-Revolutionary sculptures adorned two ceiling corners; what had once been a nobleman's receiving room had been divided into five apartments.

Irina and Lev, the young artists, offered her tea and *zakuski* (Russian hors d'oeuvres). They talked animatedly about art, poetry, vegetarianism, and philosophies of living. An hour later, Irina expressed what they all felt—that it seemed as if they had always known each other. Before Lazaroff left, Irina asked her whether she would allow her to paint her portrait; she had always wanted to paint a portrait of an American, she explained. Lazaroff knew that it meant sitting perfectly still at their house for several hours a day for many weeks. She agreed.

By the time the portrait was finished, Lazaroff had become a member of the family. She often helped put their baby to bed, accompanied the grandmother on visits to the doctor, and assisted with the shopping and cooking. Potatoes, cheese, and a special kind of dark "health bread" were their staple dinner foods. On "good" nights, when the shopping went well, they had salads of chopped carrots, cabbage, raw garlic cloves, tomatoes, eggs, and parsley. On "bad" nights their salads were just cabbage. Lazaroff learned how to shop like a Soviet; once she spotted oranges for sale and stood in line for five hours.

She and Irina often went to the *banya* together and talked about literature and philosophy. The family took long walks on warmer days, and Lazaroff met their circle of friends. Soon she began sleeping in their warm loft instead of going back to her cold dorm room; she told her Soviet roommate that she had met a "wonderful Marine at the American consulate." When she went out to do the shopping or some other errand for the family, she wore their fur coats, army pants, and peasant felt boots so that everyone she met would think she was Soviet.

Lazaroff's Russian went from good to fluent—neither Irina nor Lev spoke any English—and she gained a deep, insider's understanding of everyday Soviet life. But her relationship with her "family" meant far more to her than simply an opportunity to learn about the Soviet Union. "They were so giving, so willing to give me everything they had, even though they had comparatively little materially," she says, struggling to put words to what she several times refers to as her "spiritual" connection with Irina and Lev. "The Soviets put such a higher priority on friendship than we do; friends always come first."

The hesitation in her voice shows that she has not told this story

often, and the responsibility of disguising her friends still weighs heavily on her. "I had invaded their lives, and completely made myself at home in their apartment, and I wanted so much for them to come here and share, even for a day, in my life in America," she says after a pause. "And I realized that was out of the question. Yet they were completely accepting of that. They would tell me, 'We have come to accept our position here and we love our country very much.' I would bring them treats that I had brought from the United States, like peanuts and fresh raisins, and I worried that it wasn't fair for me to be doing this, because they would never be able to have these things again. And they said, 'Cindy, it's not important to us that you bring us these things. It's fun, but we don't need them, and our relationship isn't built on this stuff.' "

The semester ended and Lazaroff had to leave Leningrad. On the plane home, she decided that she had to figure out a way to see her friends again. "Irina and Lev really introduced me to the Russian soul, to the poetry of life there, and nurtured my love for that country," she says. "If I hadn't met them I probably wouldn't be doing what I'm doing today."

Lazaroff returned to the US and finished her year off from Princeton by working in a Pittsburgh art gallery specializing in Russian and Soviet art. At night she wrote a thesis on Leo Tolstoy's and Mohandas Gandhi's perspectives on nonviolence. Back at Princeton, she applied for a scholarship to spend the year after graduation studying in Leningrad. But the timing could not have been worse; the week before she was scheduled to defend her proposal before a panel of Princeton professors and alumni, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. "The panel baited me," she says with a grimace. "They said, 'Why do you want to go to a country whose sole purpose is to impose misery and suffering on the rest of the world?' " Lazaroff didn't get the scholarship.

But she was still determined to go back to the Soviet Union. She graduated from Princeton with a magna cum laude degree in Politics and Russian studies, then heard about the American Field Service's teacher exchange program, which sends a handful of American teachers each year to teach special classes on American culture in Soviet schools for ten weeks. She applied even though she wasn't a teacher. At first the program directors gave her little encouragement, but Lazaroff insisted that she could teach about America, and she did speak Russian. The program, like many others, was endangered by the serious crash in Soviet-American relations after the invasion of Afghanistan, but at the

last minute Lazaroff was told she could go. In autumn 1980 she and her three hundred pounds of luggage, including two hundred books and an assortment of maps, magazines, postcards, advertisements, bumper stickers, Hallmark cards, rock 'n' roll albums, and four pounds of popcorn, left to spend six weeks in Moscow and four weeks in Leningrad.

In Moscow she was assigned to School ;45, which specializes in English language instruction; in addition to the regular curriculum, students begin learning English at the age of six or seven. Moscow has more than 100 such language schools, most of which teach English, French, or German. Admittance is by entrance exam and the English language schools are considered the cream of the crop. Most, though not all, of the students are children of the well-educated and the Party elite. About eight hundred Soviet children, aged six to seventeen, attend Moscow School ;45.

When they met on her first day, Lazaroff was amazed at the flexibility and openness of the principal and the other teachers, especially Alexander Zakharovich Bessmertny, the head of the English department, a kindly, stout man with a quick sense of humor and an obvious fondness for his students. Lazaroff and Bessmertny agreed that Lazaroff should spend as much class time with the children as possible. "In our socialist society, we're going to exploit you," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "That's all right," replied Lazaroff, keeping a straight face. "I'm from a capitalist society, so I'm used to it." He suggested some possible subjects for lectures, then asked her what *she* would like to teach. After Lazaroff told him, Bessmertny broke into a broad grin. "You know the Beatles?" he began. "Well—we can work it out!"

On her first day, Lazaroff hung a map of Pittsburgh in the classroom and started telling her students about her hometown. She was so nervous that she lost her voice, and Bessmertny solicitously rescued her with cups of hot tea. But by the second day all of her jitters were gone. She began teaching about the Freedom of Information Act and the system of "checks and balances" in the American government. She hung an American flag in the classroom and explained the meaning of the stars and stripes. She described the differences between shopping in Moscow and New York City. She revealed the mysteries of slang like "I dig it" and "Wow!"

Some days she taught six fifty-minute lessons plus an extra seminar after school for the teachers. "There were days when I would lecture from seven forty-five or eight in the morning until four in the afternoon

with no breaks, because during every supposed break one of the teachers would find me and say, 'Could you just give us a short lecture on fashion?' And I'd pull out a *Vogue* magazine. Or, 'Can you just tell us about meditation?' Every free second they wanted to learn more.

"Initially both the teachers and the students really wanted to know if they could trust me. They could tell that I loved the United States and I loved being an American. But it made all the difference in the world that I was willing to be critical of some American policies. They asked me about Harlem, and I said that the first time I went to Harlem I cried, which is true. When they asked, I said I was embarrassed about Vietnam and Watergate. It was *such* a revelation for the kids. The teachers told me that some of the kids came to them and said, 'Won't Cindy get in trouble for what she said?' They were worried that the United States government might punish me."

Her honesty not only helped the students realize that Americans can speak their minds freely, but also heightened her credibility. "I knew one American teacher who would go into Soviet classrooms and say, 'In America, we have *everything*. It's the greatest, most wonderful, most beautiful country on earth.' And she had no credibility with the teachers or the kids at all. It's when they can see your love *and* your criticism of your own country, and when they feel that you respect *them*, that you have an impact."

Both teachers and students were overwhelmingly appreciative and eager to become close. Bessmertny, who loved to tease, made up a doggerel in English for her benefit:

> Little Cindy Lazaroff,
> Passed on to me her nasty cough.
> I hate to think of this affair,
> As a case of biological warfare.

The students discovered she was a vegetarian and began bringing peanuts, cauliflower, pickled beets, cans of peas, jars of "eggplant caviar," and other presents of food from their parents. The windowsill of the hotel room where she lived was soon stacked with cans and jars. Every day the students argued over who would have the privilege of taking her that night to see a movie or a play.

One fifteen-year-old girl found out that Lazaroff admired Boris Pasternak, and took her to meet some of Pasternak's family at his home, located in a beautiful wooded area outside of Moscow called Peredelkino

where many writers maintain country retreats. Afterwards, Lazaroff and several of her young friends visited Pasternak's snow-covered grave, placed flowers on it, and recited some of his works by candlelight.

Other students figured out ways to sneak Lazaroff into performances at the Taganka Theater, Moscow's most avant-garde and intellectual theater at the time. Tickets were often difficult to obtain, but these students knew a stagehand and wangled free passes. Once, between performances, they took her backstage where only stagehands and performers were supposed to be. A guard came along, and in a panic Lazaroff's friends shoved her into a nearby closet, whispered to her to be silent, and left. Alone in the dark, Lazaroff had plenty of time to visualize the headlines announcing this new international incident: "American Teacher Found Hiding Out in Moscow Theater." But the guard left, her friends returned, and they escaped to their seats just before the curtain went up.

A framed collage that her students gave her shows a black-and-white photo of Lazaroff with her hands raised and her face ignited with enthusiasm; above the photo are the words: "It's great!" Between scribbled comments in Russian are some of the children's other favorite Americanisms: "Hi! Wow! Three branches, H.E.W., Hamburger, Halloween, I (heart) New York, Prom, I dig it, Congress, X-mas." At the bottom is a "Thank you very much." On her last day of teaching in Moscow, the school had to hire two taxis and ask four boys to leave class in order to carry away all of her gifts.

Lazaroff then arrived at her Leningrad school, where the principal handed her a detailed schedule listing the topics she was to teach—a list that conspicuously avoided contemporary American culture. Cynthia was polite but firm, and she succeeded in substituting "Twas the Night Before Christmas" for *Pinocchio* and Andrew Wyeth for Michelangelo. But she taught only three or four classes a day, and it took much longer for her to develop close relationships with the students and teachers.

"The difference between the schools was vast, absolutely vast," she says. "I began to see that there were individuals in that country who could have an impact on their immediate environments. The schools reflected the personalities of the people who were running them. The *collectiv*, the group of people who are teaching there, can create an environment that's really favorable for learning, exploration, and free kinds of inquiry, or they can create an environment that's more closed and controlled.

"Teaching," she adds, "completely changed my whole perception of the Soviet Union. After being a student there, I felt a connection with individuals and not with the society at large. I thought unofficial contacts were the only worthwhile contacts. I thought that anybody who was Party member was connected with something that was wrong. But wh I went back and taught, I worked and lived in an environment where was with Party members every day. And I realized that Party membe are human beings, too."

As soon as she got to Leningrad she went to see her "family." In the two intervening years, they had frequently written and occasionally spoken on the phone, but Lazaroff, worried that their conversations were being bugged, decided not to mention that she was coming to Leningrad. Her heart pounded as she climbed the once-familiar stairs to Irina and Lev's apartment. "I had dreams that I would go to their house and that they wouldn't be there, that they would disappear. I was so scared that they had taken too much of a risk with me."

The night before Lazaroff showed up on their doorstep, Irina dreamed that they were once again together in the *banya*. "Cindy, you're here," she muttered in her dream. When Irina awoke, she told her husband about the dream. A few hours later, the doorbell rang, and Irina opened the door and began screaming near-hysterically, "Cindy's here!" Lev was sure she was still dreaming.

The three of them talked until four in the morning. Irina and Lev's son, Misha, was now three years old, and there had been other changes in their lives. The previous spring, Irina had been seriously ill, and only recently had recovered her health. She was painting the portrait of a dying poet and had to rush to finish it before he died; it was such a wrenching experience that Irina, whom Lazaroff says "internalizes the people she paints," started manifesting the poet's symptoms.

Before leaving the Soviet Union, Lazaroff returned to Moscow and to School ;45 to say good-bye to the students and teachers. In a last free-for-all question-and-answer session, the students asked her whether she believed in God, what she had learned by being in their country, and many more questions. "We think of the American students our own age as our friends," one student said. "Do American students think of us as their friends?"

Lazaroff paused, then decided to be candid. She explained that many American students believe that Soviet young people are automatons who have no individuality or free choice. A silence filled the room. Lazaroff wondered whether she had been too honest when she looked at their

hurt and confused faces. "That's only because they don't have a chance to learn about who you are," she added hastily. "Many of them would really like to get to know you better, but they don't know how."

While flying home, she realized that she owed it to her Soviet students to help give American students that chance.

She moved to New York City, worked odd jobs to pay the rent, and began an all-out search for a job in the Soviet-American citizen exchange field. During the next six months she wrote letters to nearly two hundred individuals and groups offering her services or asking for advice on starting her own exchange program. She rose at 6 A.M. and went to bed at midnight every day, single-mindedly pursuing every lead she could find. She contacted exchange groups, trade groups, peace groups, publishing companies, television networks. She thought about teaching English to Soviet émigrés. She considered becoming a nanny in Leningrad. She spent nearly two months researching Armand Hammer, the chairman of Occidental Petroleum and granddaddy of Soviet-American trade, and plotted attention-grabbing ways of contacting him personally. She even sent Hammer a colorful "balloon-in-a-box" birthday greeting that explained her interest in expanding Soviet-American exchanges and mentioned that her Soviet students all admired him.

But one by one, all of her trails went cold. In early 1981 the political climate for starting new exchanges with the Soviet Union could not have been worse; a full-throttled revival of the Cold War was under way. Existing Soviet-American exchange groups were pruning their staffs as various programs withered or were cut. For a time, Lazaroff appeared to be making progress in negotiating a teacher's exchange under the aegis of the Citizen Exchange Council, but a Soviet official in the Ministry of Education turned her proposal down. She took a job teaching Russian émigré children, but it turned out to be nightmarish—"They were little devils. They couldn't handle their newfound freedom." In the meantime, her family dropped hints about "When are you going to go out and get a real job?"

The stress of her fruitless search began weighing on her; she almost began believing that what she wanted to do was, indeed, impossible. Then in July 1981 her body intervened. While running on a beach she felt a sharp pain in her abdomen, and although she had just received a clean bill of health from a routine checkup, she went to see a gynecologist. As soon as the doctor began examining her she screamed in pain. Ultrasound tests showed an ovarian tumor the size of a grapefruit.

She went into surgery not knowing whether the tumor was malignant,

or whether the operation would mean that she would never be able to have children. She was lucky; the tumor was benign, and was skillfully removed, leaving her ovaries and uterus intact. But the hospital stay gave her a chance to think over her life. She decided that she had to give up her dream of working in Soviet-American affairs for now and concentrate on getting well. When she came home from the hospital, she found a form letter from the personnel office at Occidental Petroleum saying that "no positions were available." It seemed a sign.

Lazaroff moved to San Francisco, took a tedious job as a paralegal to pay the rent, and focused on healing her body. She tried to forget about her search, sure that California was a complete wasteland so far as exchange projects with the Soviet Union were concerned. Then a friend mentioned that he had heard that the Esalen Institute in Big Sur had a Soviet-American exchange program. Lazaroff didn't believe him at first. But eventually she called, and went to see Anya Kucharev, a translator for the Esalen program. "Someday," said Kucharev, "you are going to have to meet Jim Hickman."

Nearly eight months went by before Lazaroff and Hickman met ("which isn't surprising," Lazaroff remarks, "knowing Jim and his schedule"), but in the meantime things began looking up. Her health regained, Lazaroff landed a job in early 1982 at the International Center at Stanford University, advising students who wanted to study abroad. The Citizen Exchange Council, the group through which she had unsuccessfully tried to organize a teacher's exchange the previous year, asked her to lead a group of forty-five high school students to the Soviet Union in spring 1982. When she and Jim Hickman, the director of Esalen's Soviet-American program, finally met at a Chinese restaurant in San Francisco, they discovered that they would be in the Soviet Union at the same time and arranged to get together in Moscow.

Hickman accompanied Lazaroff on a visit to Moscow School #45 and was impressed both by the school and the easy rapport Lazaroff seemed to have with the staff and the students. He encouraged Lazaroff to focus her talents on youth exchanges. On this trip, Lazaroff took along a tape recorder and interviewed dozens of Soviet students at Moscow School #45, asking them to describe their lives, their hopes and fears, and their feelings about war and peace. When she returned, the tapes were broadcast on a local public radio show that was nationally syndicated, and she started getting calls from people interested in making contact with Soviet children.

In December 1982 Joan Steffy, a staff member at the Esalen program, called Lazaroff to tell her that children in an Oakland elementary school wanted to send New Year's Greetings to children at a school in Oakland's Soviet sister city, Nakhodka. Lazaroff agreed to help and mentioned in passing, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if the Oakland children already knew something about the Soviet Union, so that their greetings could have more substance?" Lazaroff and Steffy, who has a background in writing school curricula for McGraw-Hill and designing educational simulation games, began talking about creating a Soviet studies curriculum for American students. They met for a weekend in January 1983 to brainstorm. "We got up at 8 A.M. on the first day and said, 'Let's work a little before breakfast,' " recalls Lazaroff. "Then about 2 P.M. we looked at each other and said, 'I wonder what time it is? Maybe we should eat breakfast.' That's how excited we were about working together."

At first both thought that this project could be moonlighted, but it soon became clear that the task was huge and would require a full-time commitment. In spring 1983, Steffy, Lazaroff, and Terry Killam-Wilber, a filmmaker and educator, created a nonprofit group called the US-USSR Youth Exchange Program. In addition to designing the curriculum, they hoped to launch pen pal and art exchanges, lead numerous trips of American young people to the Soviet Union, and eventually bring Soviet young people on tours to the United States.

In early 1983, American interest in Soviet-American citizen diplomacy was on an upswing, and Lazaroff had offers to lead three groups of educators and high school students to the Soviet Union. She decided to risk quitting her secure job at Stanford in order to direct her new program, although she did not know where her salary would come from. One of the financial supporters of the Esalen program had offered to donate office space, but the Youth Exchange Program had no money, and Lazaroff personally had "not a penny to my name," she says. "The night after I turned in my keys at Stanford I was in tears thinking—What am I doing? How am I going to live?"

Fortunately, encouragement came quickly. The next day, at lunch, a friend promised five hundred dollars. Two hours later a woman philanthropist on the East Coast who had heard about the Soviet studies curriculum called and, after a twenty-minute conversation, promised five thousand dollars. Using this as seed money, Lazaroff and her colleagues managed to raise enough from foundations and individuals to start financing their plans.

Lazaroff spent half of the next year in the Soviet Union, guiding nearly two hundred American high school students and adults on trips. Her wide array of Soviet friends enabled her to take her Americans to many Soviet homes, schools, and other places not normally included on an Intourist tour. Her teen-agers danced rock 'n' roll, competed in talent shows, and played soccer games with Soviet teenagers; many came home with a desire to study Russian.

Consistently, she found, the Americans passed through a stage of euphoric shock best expressed by the phrase, "The Soviets are people, too." But she also had to guide her students through a second, more disconcerting stage of coming to terms with the differences between American and Soviet societies. "If people don't get beyond realizing 'The Soviets are human beings' and start asking, 'Yeah, okay, they *are* just like us, but why do we have these problems?', it can become a dead-end stage," she says. "Our trips are intended to whet people's appetites and inspire them to learn about the complexities."

Meeting Americans has just as important an impact on Soviets as meeting Soviets has on Americans, Lazaroff believes. Many Soviets are very curious about American life and will stop foreigners on the street to ask questions such as, "Why does Reagan want to go to war?" Many, "especially the old proletarians who generally believe what the Soviet government says," shift their preconceptions of the United States when they meet Americans working to improve relations between the countries.

Once a close woman friend, Nina, the daughter of a middle-level government official, invited Lazaroff to her home to meet her parents. Lazaroff asked Nina what her parents thought of Americans. "My mother, she will like you very very much," Nina replied. "My father—he probably will not talk to you." Lazaroff began trying to engage the father in conversation as soon as she arrived. At first, he responded to her overtures as minimally as possible without being openly rude. But as the night went on, as the cognac and wine flowed and the food was consumed, and as Lazaroff continued to tell him about herself and her work, a change came over the government official. He began participating in the conversation with genuine interest. He volunteered some of his own opinions. By the end of the evening, he and Lazaroff were robustly singing every Russian song they knew in common.

Now Nina's father is one of Lazaroff's closest Soviet friends, and their relationship has transformed his feelings about the United States. "Soon after we met, he told me that he had gone to his weekly Party meeting

where everyone kept talking about the imperialist Americans. And all he could think of, as he sat there, was his new American friend, and the discrepancy between the Party line and reality. That kind of impact, extrapolated over the whole country, is not something that's necessarily quantifiable, but it can't be discounted."

Even a conversation with a cab driver can feel like a breakthrough. One of Lazaroff's friends from Princeton was aboard the Korean airliner shot down over Soviet airspace on September 1, 1983. Lazaroff went to the Soviet Union a week later "still harboring a lot of personal grief." During a twenty-minute cab drive in Moscow, the driver, a burly fellow with blond hair, pleasantly asked her where she was from. The United States, she replied. The cab driver stiffened and was silent. After a long minute, he asked her abruptly, "What makes you think you can just go flying over our territory and violating our borders like that?"

"Wait a minute," Lazaroff said evenly. "I think of the world as one world, as a global community. What right do we have to create boundaries in the air, when the astronauts and the cosmonauts have seen one world from outer space? Isn't it absurd that we're going to kill each other over these artificial boundaries?" She described how the Korean airliner incident seemed to her a kind of signal from above, an attempt by higher powers in the universe to dramatize for humankind the fiery tragedy that might take place on a global scale if concepts like "boundaries" were not soon transcended.

After she finished, the cab driver was silent again. Finally he said, in a quiet voice, "I never thought of the world that way, but that's really interesting." When they arrived at her destination, he shook her hand warmly and wished her luck with her work.

Between the end of one tour and the beginning of the next, Lazaroff often stayed in the Soviet Union to lay the groundwork for future projects. She went "fishing" for sympathetic contacts in various Soviet organizations that deal with children and youth—the Ministry of Education, Sputnik (the youth travel agency), Pioneer Palaces, children's theaters, and many, many schools. Lazaroff estimates that she has personally visited about fifty Soviet schools. To help pay her expenses, she also worked as a consultant and negotiator for a half dozen American youth groups, theater groups, artists, and schools interested in organizing exchanges.

Always, she found, the intangibles of human relationships had a profound impact on the outcome of such negotiations. "There's always

someone to whom I feel closest on the Soviet side of every negotiation And if we reach an impasse, over money, or permission for something often this particular individual will come up later and say, 'You know if you were to present it in a different way, and offer this—but pleas don't let anyone know where this came from—then you'd get what yo want.' There's always someone who's willing to go the extra mile. Thes are people who could lose their jobs if others knew that they were doin this.

"Individuals *can* make a difference in that country," she adds, "if they believe in something and have the personality and drive and determination. It's important to seek out the people who are open, and who are in positions of influence over there, and encourage them to take risks and get involved in exchanges."

Meanwhile, Lazaroff had to unlist her home phone number because strangers started calling her at midnight and six in the morning, pleading with her to help them start an exchange program with the Soviet Union. Not everyone filled with enthusiasm for citizen diplomacy, she discovered, was equally enthusiastic about putting in the long hours and hard work that creating new private exchanges requires. "A lot of American organizations come up with an idea, say, 'Let's do it,' don't talk to the Soviets, start it on this end, and get everybody excited here," Lazaroff says. "Then it falls through and it's a disaster, because people get disillusioned and start believing, 'See, you can't do anything with the Soviet Union.' "

Lazaroff is concerned that some of the Americans now involved in Soviet-American citizen diplomacy are following a fad, and that if it were to become more fashionable to do something else, like help airlift supplies to Ethiopia, many would drop their Soviet efforts. "That doesn't mean," she adds, "that what they're doing isn't worthwhile. Even if it is just a fad for someone, or they only go on one trip, that person will come home and share his or her experience and get people thinking."

But Lazaroff can also happily point to spectacular examples of people who *have* been willing to do the dirty work, cope with the inevitable frustrations and disappointments, and successfully launch their own exchange programs with her help. One of her protégés, Paula DeCoss of Minneapolis, Minnesota, now directs the Consortium on New Educational and Cultural Ties with the Soviet Union (CONNECT), whic has brought art by Soviet children to the United States and sent painting to the Soviet Union by American children from forty states. With Laza

roff's help, David Woollcombe, the director of the Peace Child Foundation, successfully staged his play *Peace Child* in Moscow in July 1985 with a cast of both Soviet and American children, and created a live two-way satellite television linkup between children in Minneapolis and Moscow that was dedicated to the late Samantha Smith—feats that required his making no fewer than eleven trips to Moscow within a period of eighteen months.

Sharon Tennison, a San Francisco nurse and cofounder of the Center for US-USSR Initiatives, is another example of someone whose dedication has allowed her to accomplish extraordinary things in a short period of time, according to Lazaroff. At the end of Tennison's first Soviet trip, in September 1983, her group crowded into a hotel room in Leningrad and began, one by one, to talk about how the experience had changed them and how they intended to communicate what they had learned upon returning home. Lazaroff, their guide and interpreter, sat cross-legged on the floor and listened, remembering how two years ago it had seemed as though she was the only person in the world interested in citizen diplomacy. When it was her turn to speak, she started crying. "I can't tell you how much it means to me to see what this trip has done to you," she said. "I can't tell you how it feels to know I'm not alone anymore."

Lazaroff is now confident that the inroads citizen diplomacy has made are irreversible. "The fabric of US-Soviet relations will never be the same," she declares. "It's been blown so far out of the water by our wacky ideas. I don't think that it can ever go back to being the way it was, purely government-to-government, because of the initiatives that individuals have taken. People will not let it go that way—in either country. An interest has been sparked and it will never be the same."

The personal relationships that have been created between Americans and Soviets will not fade easily, she believes. Lazaroff has about five intimate Soviet friends who "have shared everything, inside and out, with me." She counts an additional two dozen Soviets as close friends, and she has visited more than a hundred Soviet private homes. How far Soviets will go in opening up their private lives, she has found, is very much an individual matter. "There are some people with whom I've shared incredible experiences, with whom I've become very close in many ways, yet who to this day, when it comes to certain questions, still just put up a barrier," she says. "Will not answer. Will not tell me f they're in the Party, for example. There's a barrier of fear, and I ealize that they're just not going to break through it easily. But we can

keep chipping away at it. I have official contacts who last year wouldn't tell me home numbers, who wouldn't see me outside of officially arranged meetings, and who now are willing to do that secretly. It's a challenge to get inside someone's apartment, to know that they trust you so much that they're willing to let you into their private lives."

It is also a trust that has to be handled carefully. Once, while staying with a Moscow friend, Dmitri, she asked if she could use his phone to call official Soviet contacts, such as the Soviet Peace Committee and Gosteleradio. Dmitri shrugged and said, fine. Lazaroff made calls for several days, until one day when Dmitri happened to come into the room just as she was dialing and casually asked her, "Who are you calling?" The American embassy, Lazaroff answered. Dmitri grabbed the phone and threw down the receiver. "You can't do that," he whispered, white-faced. "If you call the American embassy, or call an American journalist from someone's home, they could be accused of working for the CIA." Lazaroff shakes her head at the memory. If he hadn't walked in at that exact moment, she might have caused his whole family to be interrogated.

"Xenophobia predates the revolution, it carried over after the revolution, and it probably reached its most alarming and outrageous proportions under Stalin," she says. "Many people who had foreign friends at that time were suspected of being spies, and simply disappeared. Members of their families have not forgotten that, and they never will. That's why the younger generation is so important, because they did not directly experience Stalin. They don't have the same level of fear that their parents grew up with. It's another reason why my energy has gone toward young people." As the memory of Stalin fades, and as more Soviets have a chance to meet Westerners, more Soviets, she says, "want to have the opportunity to travel, to go abroad for vacations. And that's not something that can be withheld from them forever. In every exchange we have, the Soviet kids say, 'We hope someday to travel to your country.' The parents don't say that, but the kids do."

Lazaroff knows that the day when young Soviets and young Americans can in large numbers freely travel between the countries is still years in the future, but she hopes her programs will hasten that day. In the meantime, her Soviet studies curriculum is designed to give American students an experience that is the next best thing to a trip to the Soviet Union. If young people in both countries can learn more about each other, Lazaroff believes, "maybe they can negotiate with each other and learn how to share the planet more successfully than their parents and

grandparents have. The fear and ignorance that exist in this country about the Soviet Union has been building up over decades, and it's bred into us at a very young age." Recently Lazaroff discovered an old sixth-grade textbook in the attic of her Pittsburgh home that said little about the Soviet Union other than "the evil Communists are out to rule the world."

During 1983 Lazaroff gathered textbooks, photographs, maps, and suggestions from Soviet teachers for her curriculum. By March 1984 she, Joan Steffy, and several dozen volunteers and consultants were ready to field-test a seven-part curriculum designed for the seventh through twelfth grades called "Step One: Getting to Know the Soviet Union and Its People." Using videotapes, slides, maps, games, skits, and reading assignments, the lessons introduce students to the geography, history, culture, and everyday life of people in the Soviet Union.

"At the beginning the kids usually realize they don't know anything," Lazaroff says. "We ask, how many of you have ever seen a picture of the sun shining in the Soviet Union? They shake their heads. Nobody. What colors come to mind? Black, red, gray, blood—it's interesting they say 'blood' when we ask about colors. Then we show them one of our videotapes, and they start thinking—wait a minute, why haven't I ever seen this before?"

One of the videotapes, called *What Soviet Children Are Saying about Nuclear War*, is a selection of interviews with sixty Soviet children chosen randomly at two Soviet Pioneer camps. Lazaroff served as a consultant for the film, made in July 1983 and supervised by American psychiatrists Eric Chivian, John Mack, and Jerry Waletsky of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War and the Harvard Nuclear Psychology Program. The Soviet children, aged ten to fifteen, grow subdued when asked about nuclear war and express their fears that "the entire earth will become a wasteland."

Evaluation forms filled out by American students who have seen the video reveal surprise. "Soviet children aren't miniature terrorists . . . they are just like me," wrote one American student. Another student said that the video made him believe "that some of the Soviets, if not all, in time, could be our friends, and we, theirs." One child wrote that she had learned that "the Soviet Union isn't just a bunch of beasts—they are caring people."

Perhaps the most unusual lesson in the curriculum centers on J. D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, which is often studied in high

school American literature courses in both the Soviet Union and the United States. In 1983, Lazaroff asked one of the Soviet teachers at Moscow School #45 for something written by Soviet students that they could share with American students. The teacher asked her twelve- and thirteen-year-old students, who all knew and trusted Lazaroff, to write out their impressions of *The Catcher in the Rye*, one of their favorite American novels. Two days later, her friend handed her a dozen essays in English. "I haven't had a chance to correct them," the teacher apologized, "some of the grammar's wrong, but I think there's some wonderful stuff here. Use what you can."

Lazaroff still has the original essays, written on lined composition paper with words misspelled and crossed out. "They weren't pre-prepared or glossed over, and the teacher didn't change them. They were really what the kids had to say," Lazaroff remarks. "It was an example of the importance of personal relationships to this kind of work. A journalist, or someone they didn't know, could never have gone into that school and gotten something like that."

Nearly all the Soviet children seemed very moved by the book and wrote intensely personal, often poetic expressions of their feelings about it. Some interpreted the novel, the story of a rebellious teenager in a high-class preparatory school, as an accurate portrait of contemporary America; one wrote that it depicted "the real life of the American society with all its problems and difficulties," and another said that "after reading this book I understand how hard it is to live in the world where everything is sold and bought." Yet most of the students identified strongly with Holden Caulfield, the protagonist, and when they speak of his struggle to maintain principle, his loneliness, and the tragedy of others misunderstanding him, their rhetorical tone shifts and they seem to be speakin about their own lives. "Holden fights (tries somehow) for his principles but fails. Everywhere wins stupid strength," wrote one girl. The lesso encourages American teachers to ask their students to write their ow essays about *The Catcher in the Rye* before showing them the Sovi students' essays.

Other lessons teach Soviet geography through a game called "Tran Siberian Odyssey," introduce the works of Russian and Soviet autho such as Chekhov and Akhmatova, and explain "how the Soviet politic system influences the lives of its young people." A final lesson encou ages students to consider studying Russian, writing to a Soviet pen pa or participating in art, essay, or poster exchanges with Soviet schoo

"It's a menu of possible exchanges that kids can participate in, so that every kid, no matter what he or she's interested in—stamp collecting, hockey, art, the outdoors—can see there's a way to get involved," Lazaroff explains. Several of the lessons are currently distributed through Social Studies School Service, the largest distributor of supplemental social studies materials in the country; Lazaroff estimates that one hundred thousand students in thirty states have been exposed to at least one lesson.

Lazaroff's curriculum is upbeat but not pro-Soviet; it clearly states, for example, that "Soviet citizens marching with a banner voicing opposition to their government would almost certainly be immediately arrested and interrogated by the KGB." And: "A good Komsomol [Young Communist League] record is generally considered highly advantageous, if not essential, for career advancement and admission into prestigious institutions of higher learning."

What do her Soviet friends think of lines like these? "The people who have seen it, some of whom are in the Party and some of whom are not, have mixed reactions," she admits. "Some kind of laugh at those parts, others are a little embarrassed, others are shy, and a few argue. But they all know I know the system too well for them to convince me that these things aren't true. And since my Soviet friends appreciate the overall idea and purpose of the curriculum, they've been very supportive. Those who understand America understand why I have to include critical things.

"I feel that we don't try to paint a *good* picture of the Soviet Union," continues Lazaroff. "We try to paint a *realistic* picture, and try to help people here come to terms with the differences between our countries. We don't say the Soviet Union is a wonderful place to be. We don't try to hide some of the very horrible things, very tragic things, that have happened there during the last century. It's important that people know about these things and have a context for them beyond the usual stereotypes."

During their brainstorming session in January 1983, Joan Steffy asked Lazaroff what else she wanted to do in addition to writing the curriculum and leading high school trips. Lazaroff remembered that while teaching in Moscow in 1980 she had shown her Soviet students an Outward Bound film, borrowed from the American embassy, and they had loved it. Wouldn't it be wonderful, she had thought, if half of the wilderness trekkers in the film were Soviet and half were American? An expedition

where survival would be dependent on mutual cooperation and interdependence seemed a perfect metaphor for the task before the two governments. She proposed the idea to various exchange professionals when she returned to the United States in 1981. Everyone told her it was impossible. Everyone, that is, except Jim Hickman, who thought it was a terrific idea.

When Lazaroff told Steffy in 1983 that she wanted to organize Soviet-American youth wilderness expeditions, Steffy replied immediately, "Great. We'll take groups of American kids and Soviet kids hiking in the Caucasus Mountains of the Soviet Union." The trek lingered in the idea stage for several months until one of the advisors of the Youth Exchange Program put Lazaroff in touch with Dick McGowan, an American representative of the Soviet Sports Committee, who organizes climbing expeditions for adult mountaineers in the Caucasus Mountains through a company called Mountain Travel.

Of course you can take American kids to the Caucasus, McGowan told Lazaroff. Could they hike with Soviet kids? Well—that was something else. Nothing like it had ever been done. McGowan offered to introduce her to the appropriate people in the Sports Committee, but she would have to do the negotiations. Encouraged, Lazaroff telephoned Ken Mack, a twenty-one-year-old rock drummer and freshman at Hampshire College who had organized and co-led one of Lazaroff's 1983 high school tours, and Mack agreed to start assembling the American delegation.

Lazaroff spent spring 1984 taking additional American groups on tours and "literally knocking on the Sports Committee's door in Moscow every few days for four months and begging them to let us have Soviet kids." At first the director of the Sports Committee's division of international mountaineering camps, Mikhail Monastyrski, received her politely but told her that it would be "very, very difficult." Because his division of the Sports Committee only handled accommodations for foreign visitors to the Caucasus—Soviet visitors fell under a different heading—his first reaction was that Lazaroff was suggesting a bureaucratic nightmare.

But Lazaroff kept dropping by his office and nicely, but firmly, explaining her vision for this trip. As Monastyrski began getting to know her better, his manner grew less formal and he started offering her tea, chocolates, and cookies when she arrived. He began hinting that getting Soviet kids on her trip might be possible after all. Then the Soviet Union

announced its boycott of the 1984 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles, and although he never referred to the Olympics directly, Monastyrski again told Lazaroff that arranging for Soviet teenagers to participate would be extremely difficult and that he could make no promises.

Lazaroff decided to bring the American kids anyway, although she canceled plans to film the trek. When she, Ken Mack, and her eight American teenagers arrived in Moscow in July 1984, she took them to meet Monastyrski. That apparently made a difference. The night before the group flew to the Caucasus, Monastyrski told her, "I can't guarantee anything, but I'll come to the mountains with you and help you look for some Soviet kids to hike with."

The mountains themselves, however, proved nearly as challenging as conquering the Soviet bureaucracy. Lazaroff had no prior high-altitude experience and had been too busy leading tours to get in shape. The night before she left for the Caucasus, a Soviet friend asked with some concern, "Cindy—are you a mountaineer?" "No," Lazaroff replied nervously, "but I'm about to become one!"

On their itinerary was a rigorous seven-day trek into a remote region of the Caucasus called Svanetia and a four-day ascent of 18,481-foot-high Mt. Elbrus, the highest peak in Europe. The challenging but technically uncomplicated climb of this ancient volcano in the isthmus between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea quickly became the symbolic focus of the trip. According to Greek myth, when Jason and the Argonauts caught sight of the snow-covered double peaks of Mt. Elbrus they believed they had reached the end of the earth. A traditional Georgian legend says that a magical bird, named "Simurg," has its nest atop Mt. Elbrus and sees the past with one eye and the future with the other. "When the bird Simurg rises in the air," the legend goes, "the ground shakes from the beating of its wings, the storms howl, the sea grows rough, and all the sleeping powers of the deep wake to life."

But it was quickly apparent that few of the American hikers were in sufficient physical condition to attempt Mt. Elbrus. Their first training hike, at eight thousand feet, left Lazaroff and many of the others exhausted. One calamity after another winnowed out all but the most hale. Ken Mack became ill on a three-day training hike over a glacier. Lazaroff sprained her ankle in the snow and had to be supported between two Soviet guides during a ten-hour hike back to the base camp. One American hiker had asthma and couldn't handle the altitude; another suddenly manifested a fear of heights.

Fifteen-year-old Paul Brunell, whose fair-skinned complexion made him particularly vulnerable to high-altitude glare, did not put on his protective dark goggles in time during one glacier climb and became snow-blind. The Soviet doctor with the group, Boris Donnikov, wrapped Paul's head in bandages and led him by hand down the glacier. The rest of the group followed them, subdued, worried that Paul might have permanently damaged his eyes but also moved by this living demonstration of Soviet-American trust. Two hours later, they were off the snow. After a brief rest, Donnikov continued to lead Paul, who was in excruciating pain, by the hand and to carry him over icy streams for another five hours of hiking back to the base camp.

The Soviet guides soon leveled with Lazaroff and Mack—the group would never survive the Svanetia trek. But the guides cheerfully offered to take them on simpler hikes that were more in keeping with their abilities. And a week after they had arrived, Monastyrski announced that he had worked out a way for the American trekkers to team up for several hikes with a group of young Soviets who were spending a month and a half in a nearby mountaineering training camp.

A few days later, the remaining healthy Americans set off with no less than seventy Soviet youths on a three-day trek through lush meadows carpeted by wildflowers and ringed by imposing snow-covered massifs. Despite the language barrier, the Americans quickly made friends with some of the less shy Soviets. Mark Lawrence, a freshman at Stanford, wrote on his return that "in the mountains, I found all people—Russians, Americans, and the people of other nationalities we met—are reduced to just that—people. Not only are the basic necessities of mountaineering contingent upon teamwork, but when a group of people is ten miles and a twelve-thousand-foot-high pass away from the nearest civilization, the indomitable human need for companionship, for comfort in the wilderness, comes through loud and clear."

During one lunch break in the brilliant high-altitude sunshine, Lazaroff's friend Andrei Orlov, a Soviet free-lance journalist, brought together a group of about two dozen Soviets and Americans and started asking them questions about the future of their two countries. "We'd never seen Americans before except through the windows of tour buses," one young Soviet said as he spoke about how the hike had changed his perceptions. Remembers Ken Mack: "The Soviets would say, 'I think there should be peace between Americans and the Soviet Union, and I'm committed to that,' and the Americans would agree. And then Andrei said, 'When your parents were young they might have said the same

thing. But as they got older, they lost their commitment to peace. What is it that will keep you from losing your commitment?' They were very good questions."

The Soviet hikers invited the Americans to their "graduating" party marking the end of the Soviets' training session. In elaborate mock rituals, the Soviets dressed up in wild costumes and pantomimed placations to the mountain gods; the Americans joined in the skits, singing, dancing, and general high jinks. "I remember there seemed to be people in togas everywhere—on top of the buildings, in the trees, on the ground," Ken Mack says. The Soviets were pinned with badges signifying the completion of the alpine training program. "They pinned us too," Lazaroff recalls, "even though we hadn't earned it."

Only two members of the American group, Mark Lawrence and Amy Bayer (who later wrote about the trip for *Seventeen* magazine) were capable of attempting the Elbrus climb, which requires a grueling seven-hour final ascent over snowfields and glaciers. But they were thwarted by the weather, which even in July can turn from sunny and calm to an opaque blizzard in minutes. The morning they planned to make their final ascent was overcast, and the Soviet guides said it was too dangerous to try.

"On the horizon lurks the peak of Elbrus reminding me how close we came to what would have been an incredible accomplishment for us inexperienced Americans," Mark Lawrence wrote in his journal. "Yet also on the horizon lurks a more elusive and spectacular summit, that of world peace and understanding. Our expedition perhaps nudged the world ever so slightly up that mountain, but a very long way remains unscaled."

At the end of the trip, Lazaroff told Monastyrski and the Soviet guides that she would bring another group of American kids next year to the Caucasus along with a film crew; they would be "in absolutely tip-top physical shape," she hastily added. Monastyrski agreed to arrange for ten young Soviet hikers to accompany the ten Americans for the full three weeks. "The Soviets were willing to give us kids for the entire time and let them be with us day, night, in tents, sharing everything—things we couldn't have dreamed of the year before," says Lazaroff. "They had caught the vision. That is the most exciting part of all of this for me—getting Soviets who really couldn't have cared less about any of this to the point where they are absolutely thrilled about it, proud of it, and brainstorming how to make it bigger and better."

During much of the next year Lazaroff and film producer Lynne Joiner

fund-raised and negotiated with the Sports Committee and Sovinfilm, the Soviet agency that handles foreign filmmaking, for an American film crew of six to accompany the hikers. Through *The Challenge of the Caucasus*, an hour-long documentary narrated by Leonard Nimoy to be shown on the Turner Broadcasting System, and a shorter film clip for the MacNeil-Lehrer Report on national public television, they hoped to bring the image of Soviet-American cooperation to an audience of millions.

By spring 1985 the trek had become an all-consuming task, and as she fell behind schedule in her other projects Lazaroff at times wondered whether the trek was worth it. But she knew that an important precedent would be set if Soviet and American young people were allowed to mingle so unconventionally in the wilderness. She hoped it would help make some of her other long-range visions come true—bringing Soviet kids to the United States for wilderness expeditions, expanding the mountain treks to include teenagers from China and other countries, and getting young people from East and West to go to Third World countries for cooperative work projects and wilderness trips.

Lazaroff and Mack chose the American participants, all between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one, from over a hundred applicants on the basis of their physical condition and their commitment to working to improve Soviet-American relations, and selected a geographically, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse group. Some were enrolled in Ivy League colleages; some were not college-bound. Some came from privileged backgrounds, while others needed full or partial scholarships from various sources to pay their way.

In Moscow, Monastyrski found a group of ten teenagers who belong to a mountaineering sports club and who were already planning to spend the summer in the Caucasus Mountains. Although this meant that the Soviet group was not as diverse, Lazaroff did not blame Monastyrski for resorting to the simplest solution. "He normally doesn't deal with any Soviets, just foreigners, so this was a tremendous amount of work for him," she says. "He told me once, in good-humored exasperation, that he could organize fifteen trips of American adults to the Caucasus in the time it took him to organize our trip."

In July 1985, ten young Americans stepped out of a bus in the Caucasus village of Cheget and shyly shook hands with ten young Soviets. Within minutes the Soviets were helping unload the Americans' gear and carrying it into the unpretentious hotel that would be their base

camp for day hikes. At the end of the valley loomed Mt. Elbrus, blanketed in snow, mysterious, awesome.

A few days later, Lazaroff, the young hikers, a half-dozen Soviet mountain guides, and an American film crew lugging several hundred pounds of equipment set off with backpacks through the beautiful poplar, beech, birch, and rhododendron forests of the Caucasus Mountains, crossing wildflower-filled meadows to snowfields where they could practice their snow-climbing and ice-ax techniques. Lazaroff knew within hours that this trip would be nothing like the previous year's ordeal; this time, she had been in physical training for months. "We did a very rigorous hike, and I didn't even feel it," she says. "It was an invigorating reminder of the individual potential we all have, if we choose to work at it and develop it—and an indication of what's possible on a larger scale."

The hikers soon confronted the language barrier. Only two of the Soviet teenagers spoke any English, and only two of the American teenagers spoke any Russian. Impromptu language lessons began springing up next to rock piles and rivers, but communication often became frustrating. "Verbal communication hasn't been the ice-breaking element in our relationships with the Soviets," noted Harvard undergraduate Jay Winthrop after a few days of crossed signals.

The intricacies of a modern American dome tent perplexed the Soviet young people who tried earnestly to help the Americans put up their tents one night as darkness approached and a freezing wind came up. "The long poles were going in the short slots and the short poles were going in the long slots, and the tent looked like a square when it was supposed to be a dome," recalls eighteen-year-old Beth Ewing of Washington, DC. "We kept saying 'pull,' and they didn't understand 'pull.' It was so frustrating, we all felt like killing each other." After their efforts resulted in something that resembled a crumpled hang glider, they started over again—and succeeded.

Another source of frustration was food, and the hikers' differences in taste. Food was complicated enough among members of the American group, which was half vegetarian, but even the nonvegetarians had trouble getting used to the regular fare of boiled goat meat. "Each night you'd have twenty-five kids sitting around a campfire, who don't speak the same language and don't eat the same food, trying to cook a dinner for twenty-five people," says Jay Winthrop. And after surviving dinner, there was breakfast to contend with. The Americans gagged on the Soviet

hot cereal, which to them seemed to consist entirely of milk and sugar with a few cereal grains mixed in, but eventually they discovered a compromise concoction.

Soon the hikers were ready for their first major trek, a six-day journey across the 11,500-foot-high Betcho Pass to Svanetia, a region in the Soviet republic of Georgia. The weather was mild when they hiked to a camp several thousand feet below the pass. The next morning, however, a stiff wind came up and snow swirled around them as they struggled against the wind for five hours to gain the pass. Although everyone made it, Betcho Pass "intimidated a lot of people," Lazaroff says. "It was supposed to be a checkout test to see if we were ready for Elbrus. But a lot of people started wondering 'If this is so hard, how will I ever make it up Elbrus, which is seven thousand feet higher?' "

At the pass, which is part of an ancient route connecting Russia and Georgia, the hikers could fully appreciate the feat memorialized by several plaques; during World War II, a handful of Soviet mountaineers made more than twenty trips across Betcho Pass to lead hundreds of children, women, and old people out of Nazi-occupied territory to safety. But the hikers could not rest long—they still had a five-hour descent to the valley below. A mile from their campsite, twenty-one-year-old Maureen Eich twisted her ankle on a loose rock. Soviet physician Boris Donnikov, who had gone with Lazaroff's group the previous year, piggybacked her to the camp.

Although the ancient Greeks knew Svanetia well, and Alexander the Great's armies visited there in 300 B.C., the area is known to few travelers today. Villagers run sheep and goats on mountain pastures in a way of life that has changed little over the centuries. Medieval fortress towers that once protected families during invasions still stand. Georgians are famous for their exuberant hospitality toward guests, and when the hikers arrived in the village of Mestia they were welcomed by men with daggers tucked in their belts and women in long sky-blue dresses leading a ceremony that included a lamb-slaughtering and traditional music and dancing in a meadow. It was a scene as foreign to the hikers from Moscow as it was to the Americans, but soon the Svanetians had pulled everyone into the circle and had them dancing as well.

Delighted by these unusual guests, one of the older dancers spontaneously invited the entire group to his daughter's wedding feast the next evening. "We are all here as his family," Lazaroff announced a the feast, translating a toast by the proud father, and the rest of th

night was spent in singing, dancing, and general merriment. "The group really came together," says Lazaroff. "It was the high point of the trip so far."

Lazaroff and Mack noticed that some of the Soviet guides who had been diffident the previous year were now eager to talk with them, over tea brewed with freshly gathered mountain herbs, about possibilities for other joint wilderness trips. "That's what's really exciting to me," says Lazaroff, "getting them so enlisted in the process, so invested in the idea, that they start suggesting things. 'We could take you on a canoe trip through a historical part of Old Russia,' they said, or 'We could take you cross-country skiing, or white-water rafting.' "

Closer friendships also began developing between the young Soviet and American hikers. The Soviets threw a surprise seventeenth birthday party for Kari Anderson, one of the Americans. The Americans persuaded their base camp hotel to let them play their rock 'n' roll tapes, a language the Soviets had no trouble understanding when everyone hit the dance floor. There was much giggling in tents and singing around campfires, and almost anything, from seeing a new wildflower to attempting to cook a meal, became a pretext for a language lesson.

Inevitably, a few conversations turned to politics and different ways of looking at the world. Once one of the Soviet boys whispered to Lazaroff over breakfast that "I had an incredible conversation late last night with Jay [one of the Americans]." Lazaroff could tell from his voice that he had "just gone through something monumental. He had seen the world through an American's eyes."

But to the American hikers' surprise, the Soviets did not devour their ideas about individual rights and free enterprise. It was difficult for the Americans to accept that while the Soviets loved rock 'n' roll, enjoyed wearing blue jeans, and were curious about life in America, they were not anxious to become just like Americans. "I thought by this time we'd be winning them over," said one puzzled American halfway through the trip. A few suspected that the Soviets had been screened for ideological purity; they couldn't believe that random Soviet teenagers would react lukewarmly to descriptions of the American political system and democratic principles. Lazaroff reports, however, that "the Soviet kids did not strike me, based on my experience, as Party-line, one-sided kids—they were more curious and open, but very shy."

The Soviet group was closely knit, but the American group was so diverse that Lazaroff had to do nearly as much diplomacy within her

own group as she did with the Soviets. "We tried so hard to get kids that were *so* self-sufficient and strong that we went a little overboard," admits Lazaroff. And this collection of individualists had to grapple with the differences between a society that emphasizes individual values and one that emphasizes communal values. "When Americans are out in the wilderness, they want to prove that they can be strong and self-sufficient," says Lazaroff. "The Soviets, on the other hand, feel that the group has to share the burden for everybody, and that if someone isn't as strong as someone else, the stronger person carries the weaker person's stuff."

One American who was determined to carry her own heavy pack got furious when some Soviets insisted on lightening her load. She couldn't understand why they wouldn't leave her alone, and they couldn't understand why she wouldn't let them help her. Another time, this same young woman was trailing the rest of the group, and one of the Soviet guides asked, "Where are your friends?" She explained they were up ahead, that they moved at a different pace. "I don't understand," said the Soviet. "Are they really your friends? In our country we would never make someone walk alone."

Once the headstrong individualism of the Americans got them into trouble. At an icy river crossing, the Soviet guides directed the group to the best fords. But some of the Americans ignored their warnings, tried their own route, and promptly fell in the river. A Soviet guide helping to pull them out also slid in the current. "When the water is freezing, and you have twelve more hours to hike," muses Lazaroff, "that kind of thing makes a real impression."

Meanwhile, tension built about the Elbrus climb. While the group was hiking up another snowfield a call came over the walkie-talkie of the head Soviet guide, Slava Volkov, reporting that a Czechoslovakian woman climber, who had attempted to climb Elbrus without a guide, was missing in a blizzard. Two days later, they learned that the woman had been found frozen to death near the summit. It brought the number of people who had frozen on the mountain to ten that year.

Nervousness about whether the group would make it to the top led to small disputes even as the group came closer together. The Soviet guides found the American hikers' tendency to wear Sony Walkmans on dangerous stretches of glacier exasperating. The Americans grumbled about the food and their lack of showers. The hikers were scared, says Lazaroff, and they "were taking it out on each other, complaining abou

ttle nitpicky things that had nothing to do with what they were really fraid of. We said that getting to the top of Elbrus wasn't the most mportant thing, and the kids knew that, but it was another thing to eally feel it."

It was a relief, everyone felt, when they finally began climbing toward he Priutt Refuge, a metal bunkhouse on the slopes of Mt. Elbrus located it nearly fourteen thousand feet. They spent a day acclimatizing to the altitude and doing a last "checkout" climb to an overlook at fifteen thousand feet. Most of the climbers made it. One who didn't was Joel Mahnke of Telluride, Colorado, who had missed the Svanetia trek because of altitude sickness and had difficulty breathing once again. "Elbrus isn't what we're here for," he said that night, lying on his back in pain and fighting back tears while the movie cameras and microphones hovered over him. "I did my best, and I feel I've gotten a lot of things out of this trip, but Elbrus isn't one of the things I'm going to get."

That night, Slava Volkov gave the climbers longer odds than they had expected: if the weather held he thought they had a fifty-fifty chance. Many of the hikers had chronic headaches, diarrhea, and shortness of breath. The group was split in two so that the stronger climbers would have a better chance of making it. At 3 A.M. on August 3, 1985, the Soviet and American hikers rose and ate breakfast. No one said much. Led by Slava Volkov and Cynthia Lazaroff, the first group set off in the below-zero darkness.

The mountain—majestic, looming, seemingly so near—glowed in the moonlight. Stars shone. Though it was windy, it was unusually clear. Later the hikers would recall the extraordinary beauty of that dawn: the pink alpenglow striking faraway peaks, the sun creeping brilliantly over the Caucasus range. But at the time they kept their thoughts to themselves while they concentrated on breathing, on one step at a time.

It took five hours for the lead group to trudge to the eighteen-thousand-foot mark called "the saddle" and plop on the snow, now blazing in the midmorning sun, for a rest. At this altitude even opening a water bottle took concentrated mental and physical effort. In the thirty-five-mile-per-hour wind, many had lost all feeling in their hands or feet. Several considered turning back. Maureen Eich had already turned back, reluctantly, realizing that if she continued she might permanently damage her injured ankle.

Far below the saddle, twenty-year-old Karen Bortolazzo fought dizziness, a fever, and extreme fatigue with the help of Soviet guide Victor Goryach. She wavered on her feet, her crampons and ice ax sinking heavily in the snow. Every few hundred yards, she collapsed. Every time she collapsed, Victor Goryach held her in his arms and let her cry out of frustration and exhaustion. Every time, he asked her, "Down?" meaning: "Do you want to turn back?" "*Nyet!*" replied Karen Bortolazzo. "Up!" He would then coax her into standing up and walking a little farther before collapsing again. "Down?" "*Nyet!* Up!" Slowly, excruciatingly, the young American woman and the young Soviet man inched toward the summit.

Also below the saddle was Ken Mack, the coleader of the trek, who had had a year to brood about not making it to the summit last time. He was ill again, but he tried not to panic and paced himself. "You know, Kenny is going to have to turn back," Slava Volkov told Lazaroff at the saddle, after conferring with the other guides by walkie-talkie. Lazaroff knew how hard Ken Mack had worked for this trip, how much it meant to him to make it this year. But she had to put it out of her mind and concentrate on getting her own reluctant body up the mountain. Although she didn't know it, Ken Mack persuaded the guide with him to let him continue a little longer.

The climbers couldn't rest at the saddle long. The last five hundred feet of elevation gain, they knew, would be the toughest of all. An hour after they began hiking again, Lazaroff saw a red American jacket splayed on the snow ahead of her, a few feet off the trail. She couldn't see who was in it at first. "Cindy!" she heard a voice call out weakly. It was Jay Winthrop, one of the strongest and most self-confident of the American climbers. Lazaroff and Volkov went over to him. "I need water," he moaned. "I don't think I'm going to make it." Lazaroff's voice grew determined. "Jay. You're so close. You *have* to get up. You can do it."

A little ahead of them, seventeen-year-old Troy Shortell, of Solvang, California, was following the bootsteps of Alexei Khokhlov, his Soviet tent partner. Alexei paused and hunched over, needing to catch his breath. Troy decided to keep going. Kick, test, up. Kick, test, up. He was almost there. The rounded curve of ice ahead of him gave way to an arch of blue. Alexei was at his side. Kick, test, up. They were there.

Troy took a tiny forty-eight-star American flag out of his pack, a family heirloom passed down from his grandfather, and tied it to his ice ax. Alexei did the same with a tiny handmade Soviet flag. Smiling behind

the faceless masks of their balaclavas, they joined hands, planted their ice axes on the summit, and watched the flags whip in the brilliant sunshine.

"It was the meaning of the trip for me," Troy said later. "I was standing there with my hand in the hand of a human being who has been called my enemy for so many years. I felt a real triumph both personally and for the whole world—the youth of two countries coming together, really trusting one another and respecting one another and cooperating and serving as a model for the world to follow. Standing there with one common bond and one common goal, I knew that we *can* have peace and live together and respect each other as human beings."

One by one, others joined them. It had taken them an average of two hours to climb the last five hundred feet. Lazaroff, Slava Volkov, Jay Winthrop, and the other Soviets and Americans in the lead group stood on the summit and hugged each other in a circle around the flags. Many were crying.

Over the next few hours, the rest of the climbers, including Ken Mack, including Karen Bortolazzo and Victor Goryach, staggered to the summit.

And how did Cynthia Lazaroff, her five-foot-one frame buried beneath the bulky padded arms of two Soviets hugging her in that summit circle, feel now that her dream of five years had come true?

I couldn't believe it. I had no sense of reality, partly because at that altitude reality becomes very elusive," she recalls. "It was a numb feeling—it was so exciting, so wonderful, so unbelievable. Seeing the flags planted there brought tears to my eyes.

"But I also had the sense it was only the beginning. It wasn't the climax—it was only a step. Even when people say that something isn't possible, if you really try, and if you envision it and give that vision life, and if enough people believe in it, then you can do it. That's what I felt at the top. That it is possible. That it can be done."