

## A CONVERSATION WITH A SOVIET OBSERVER

**Professor Leon Lipson\***

When it fell to me to consider the talk I would have the privilege of submitting to you this morning, I reflected, of course, on the coincidence between Law Day and May Day, and my thoughts went back to that May Day celebration which I was fortunate enough to attend in Moscow in 1963. After watching the drive past and march past, together with other foreign guests — some of them, like me, on the exchange program with the Academy of Sciences of the USSR, other representatives of the Cuban or other governments — we were remitted to an intimate luncheon on the second floor of the Hotel Metropol, for about two hundred persons. And midway through the meal there was an exchange of toasts. The Chinese had pride of place and gave the first toast; then, I believe, the Czechoslovak delegation, and then down — if that's the direction — down the line. After the "socialist" countries had finished, it was the United States' turn, and the senior United States scholar present — not I — gave a toast, the gist of which came across only in English, because the little girl from Intourist or from the Academy who did the interpreting diplomatically lost her capacity to interpret very soon after the toaster began. He said, in effect, "As a child of a socialist father" — thus anticipating, perhaps, the Lubell findings reported by Mr. Methvin — "As the child of a socialist father, I used to take part in May Day demonstrations in the early years of this century, in the United States. But in the United States, all the things that we socialists demonstrated for in those days have become reality, and so May Day has become a sort of children's holiday. And my toast is to express the wish that in the Soviet Union, too, some of the things that we have achieved in the United States may come to be achieved in the Soviet Union and that with you, as with us, May Day will become a children's holiday."

It did not increase his or our popularity in that gathering.

But then it seemed to me that there were likely to be no proper representatives of the May Day part of Law Day-May

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Day in this gathering, at least on this side of the microphone. And I thought I owed it to you to convey, in a manner more provisionally sympathetic than that of perhaps any of the speakers — with the possible special exception of Mr. Li, who suggested yesterday in his comments some ways in which a Chinese Communist perspective might lead us to take a different view of some of the events discussed, the attitudes toward the subject of this conference that might be expressed by someone from that side. So I thought the most useful thing I could do would be to report to you on a long conversation I had not long ago with a Soviet observer of the American, as well as the Soviet, scene.

To protect all concerned, let me call him by the name of Maxim L'vovich Spolin—S P O L I N. I'll tell you a little bit about him. He's trained in the law. He's reasonably well advanced in the Soviet hierarchy. He is critical, but not disaffected. He is a member of the Party, but candor keeps breaking out at unpredictable moments. We know each other well enough to exchange views from time to time on our respective polities and their role in the world.

He knows, for example, that I take the position that the word "democracy," though it has a rubbery content, can be stretched only so far, and that if it's to mean anything at all, I suppose that it ought to be applied to the polity we live in, and probably not, by most understandings, to the polity he lives in. I know that he disagrees with this. And, indeed, he said to me, "Yes, you live in a democracy. Well, no doubt you have read in your glorious free press the publication 'The Voice of the Dolphin' and other essays by Leo Szilard," — which indeed I had — the Hungarian émigré physicist who was a propagandist in very high circles for the first idea of research into the atomic bomb; it was he who engineered the Einstein-Roosevelt letter; and then he was a propagandist and agitator for various kinds of peace initiatives, through "Pugwash" and through the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. He had a gift for satirical writing. In one of the stories in that collection, to which Mr. Spolin recalled my attention, he used the device, well known since at least the Eighteenth Century, of a satirical commentary on present society by means of the resuscitation, in a future society, of a man from this society frozen in suspended animation and then later revived. And in

his version of that, the Twentieth Century American who is revived five thousand years later is told by his host to have no fear because he has come to life again in a democracy. "A democracy," says the revived antique, "oh, yes. You mean a place where people may say what they think, because they do not think that which they must not say?"

"Well," I said to Maxim L'vovich, "we understand each other well enough to know that I can see the mote in your eye, and you can see the beam in my eye. Nevertheless, you must agree that at least we here can boast of more permitted diversity than you have."

"For us," he said, "unity in diversity is much more important than the diversity out of which unity may later come. For us, unity is indeed very important, and we have it. Perhaps it's true that we have a little more in the way of bitter opposition; although, reading your American press, I see that you are not very far behind us. But perhaps we have a little more in the way of bitter opposition, but while that is very intense, its numbers are negligible, because the great bulk of our people are behind us. Indeed it's a melancholy truth," he continued, "that the greater the unity, the more and the worse is the negligible amount of opposition that persists. Yet we have not only the leading role of the Party, which I have the honor to represent," he said, "but we have also very large popular participation. There are many ways for nonconformists to try to win others over to their view. If they wish, they may debate in Party channels until they lose. If they wish, they may make sharp criticisms of the policies of the government. They may attack red tape; they may attack corruption; they may write letters of complaint to our press, which serves an ombudsman function; they may take part in the massive criticism of drafts of pending legislation, which go on by the hundreds of thousands of notes and memoranda and meetings and agitational sessions. Participation, to us, is a very important value; and we have assured it by organizational means which in massiveness and intensity and frequency largely surpass anything that you can boast of. You claim to be able to participate; but, in fact, that participation is available only to the rich — those who can afford the media, those who can afford the increasingly expensive attributes of public attention."

"There may be a little something in that," I said. "On the other hand, I'm not so sure that you publish all that you say

you do. For example, what about your laws? Not even your statutes are altogether published. Your regulations are published in very small, casual number. One has the impression that your administrators are marching to the cadence of unseen music which is written down on mimeographed regulations that are kept in their desk drawer and are available for official use only. When one asks what the statistics of crime are in your country, one finds only general assertions that crime is steadily decreasing; and if one puts all the percentage figures of asserted decline together, one could find that crime is now a vanishing phenomenon in your country. Why don't you simply publish the statistics and let the chips fall where they may?"

"Well," he said, "you have this mania for publicity. Not only do you send your U-2's and your spy satellites over; not only do you make your hypocritical Open Skies proposal — Open Spies proposal, we should say; you persist in putting your cameras where they do not belong; you persist in supposing that the government is open to the general public, although I'm glad to see that some of your people understand that some things have to be kept security-classified. But we believe that there are appropriate limits to publicity. The reason that we can keep publicity down is that within the leading cadres of the Party, we know that we can trust one another to decide what is the best for the polity. We know that there are things which the large mass of politically less advanced people ought not to be confused by having been given access to."

"You know," I said, "it's our faith that confusion is productive, that the confusion of the populace may be a condition precedent to their enlightenment. And I'm not altogether happy to hear you, a professed communist, a man on whose lips the praise of the people is ever present, commenting in such a disparaging tone about the state of political enlightenment of the people."

"Well," he said, "there are people, and people. There are people we call the *narod*; that's the people, and we're all for them. But sometimes they say things that show that they're politically backward, and then they are *obyvateli*, they are philistines. And to philistines we don't have to pay attention, except by isolating them from a position where they can do harm, and attempting to enlighten them if possible; but they

certainly are not the *vox populi*; they are not the people whose voice must be heeded. We have to accept the responsibilities of leadership."

"Well," I said, "we understand the needs of leadership, too, and yet we think that leadership requires a certain alternation of men in the leading posts."

He said, "Oh, you mean by periodic assassination?"

I said, "No, you have misunderstood me. That's an unfortunate accident."

He said, "We have no accidents."

I said, "Yes, I'm familiar with the dialectic. Nothing is ever accidental, if analyzed deeply enough. But I don't want to debate with you the mysteries of the various assassinations. What I'm talking about is the suspicious continuity of the domination of one group in a country, because to me that's incompatible with a democracy, the entitlement to which we were considering just a few moments ago."

"Well," said Maxim L'vovich, "you see, in our country the way is open to the talented. A man may rise from no matter how humble a position; if he is talented and energetic, his lowly birth does not count against him. He may rise to be equal to the mightiest in the land. The occupational mobility of our population is very much higher than it used to be. People of proletarian origin are not discriminated against."

I said, "What about people of other origin?"

He said, "If they live down their past; if they show that they have understood the errors of their parental milieu, there is nothing that is blocked to them. We believe in popular participation. How easy is it for everybody in your country, no matter how humble his birth, to attain the summits of power, given talent and energy and persistence?"

"Well," I said, "occupational mobility is fairly high in the United States. Any boy can become president, we say, although we don't yet say any girl, and we do mean any white boy."

"You see what I mean. Everybody has to begin to suggest *some* qualifications."

I took another tack. I said, "You do have to admit that you suppress dissent rather more bloodily and harshly than we do."

"Look at it this way," he said. "We have goals. The only reason we are entitled to be in the leading role in this country, in the Soviet Union, is that we have goals. We have a theory which has stood the test of time. Indeed, it has passed the one test that really counts, the test of success, so that our success is at once the foundation of our claim to legitimacy and the condition for our further maintenance of power. But our goal is not simply the goal of maintaining ourselves in power, though that is what cynics outside like to think. Our goal is that of creating that society which is held out as the bright future, the vision of communism. It's a great thing," Maxim L'vovich continued, "to have goals. Your leaders, so far as I understand the United States, don't really have goals. They have a notion of a status quo, if they are liberal, which they want to defend. If they are conservative, they have a notion of a status quo ante, to which they want to return. Their ideas of the status quo are inaccurate. Their myth of the status quo ante is fanciful. But what have they for a *future*? A return to normalcy of some sort. That's no kind of goal. That accounts for the peculiarly unstrung quality of your public life. We have accepted certain sacrifices in order to cherish the goals that we do. The society agrees with us, because the society and we are the same. The myth of a separation between society and State in the Soviet Union is an anti-Soviet canard. We intend to achieve those goals, and we invite all who believe in them to join us."

He continued, "You reproach us, for example, with opposition to religion. Yet I put to you, Mr. Lipson, the question: Which is worse, to have a bewildering variety of permitted religions in which very few believe at all, or a single permitted religion, which, to be sure, calls itself antireligious, but in which several millions at least do believe. A Martian looking at your society and at our Soviet society would award the prize for religious leadership to us, and not to you."

I said to him, "It seems to me that your society cannot tolerate disorder."

"Well," he said, "you must understand that we've had a great deal of disorder in our short life as a country. We had two substantial revolutions in 1917; we had four years of intervention and civil war; we had the very difficult years of the period of the cult of personality."

I said to him, "Which personality have you in mind?"

And he said, "Don't trifle with me. I mean *that* personality! We had the resistance to collectivization of agriculture, the resistance to industrialization, disastrous famines, a bloody prolonged international war, occupation, uprooting of population, devastation, scorched earth, enormous movements of armies, enormous devastation by firepower. You haven't gone through that. Disorder, for you, is a happy, tumbling, buzzing, blooming luxury. Disorder, for us, is a searing memory. If, in order to maintain that kind of order which is necessary for our kind of progress, we have to resort to a certain amount of coercion, it's in order to postpone or ward off the sort of anarchy of which we've already had too much."

"But," I suggested to him, "you could certainly afford a little more in the way of toleration, could you not? How important, for example, are these dissidents of yours? How much would be lost if you permitted them to parade their non-conformity in the public eye; if you gave them a forum by way of a few hundred thousand permitted copies of their own magazine, "The Chronicle of Current Events"; if you, let's say, allowed them to elect someone to the Parliament? You could certainly ask them to call him a member of the Communist Party, but you could give him a forum. Now, wouldn't that be a better way to dispose of it than maintain this enormous security apparatus?"

He said, "Who told you it was enormous?"

"Well," I said, "you are a country of great and creative people. You've all said that, and I see no reason to deny it. You are the most advanced underdeveloped country in the world. You have an enormous gross national product. And then when it is divided, gross national product per capita, it's still pretty big. Yet when that's compared with the standard of living of your people, there's an awful lot that disappears somewhere; and if it doesn't disappear into the military and the security apparatus, where does it go to?"

"Well," he said, "the sphere of coercion is steadily narrowing. The sphere of persuasion is steadily growing. That is one of the law-regulated, one of the regular developments of Soviet history, ever since the early 1950's. We want to continue that. But it must not get out of bounds."

"Well, what bounds are you to set?" I said. "Are you to use the firing squad, the concentration camp, the knout or the carrot?"

"There was," he said, "a certain amount of repression in the old days, but that is long gone. The political prisoners, as Krushchev told the public, have all been released and many of them rehabilitated."

I said, "Posthumously?"

And he said, "Well, some posthumously, and some in their lifetimes. But, for the most part, we have relaxed our instruments of repression. The sanctions are not as harsh as they used to be, and that's partly because of the increasing political culture of all of our people. But the threat that they may be reimposed is tactically necessary and I must say now, stepping out of the confines of Soviet domestic policy, that if you, in what you call the free world, continue your hostile policy toward the Soviet Union, then the Soviet Union may again become an armed camp of the sort that it was in the '30's and '40's, and the possibility of domestic repression may arise again. Thus, to some extent, it depends upon you and on your cold warriors there in the Pentagon, whether we shall continue on the relatively liberal course on which we're now embarked."

"Well," I said, "I don't really think you can shuffle off the responsibility for your repression on us that way."

"If you knew more about Marxist-Leninist teaching, Mr. Lipson, you would understand that the conflicts you make so much of in our policy are really what we call non-antagonistic contradictions."

Well, Maxim L'vovich had underestimated me there. I knew about non-antagonistic contradictions. Perhaps not all of you know quite as much about them as Maxim L'vovich did. This is an interesting feature of Marxist-Leninist theory. As you know, the analysis of the dialectic in the Marxian style assumes that, to put it very roughly, life is constantly in motion, and every phenomenon calls forth a contradictory phenomenon, which has to be resolved, Hegelian-wise, by a synthesis which, in turn, becomes the thesis for a new contradiction, and so on.

Now, such an analysis, when transferred from the realm of thought to the realm of nature, by Marxism, and when transferred from the realm of science to the realm of politics, by political Marxism, is tactically satisfactory so long as the



people who use that theory are in opposition. But what happens when the regime is led and defended by people who claim to adhere to the notion of continuing contradictions? The question poses itself: Are there contradictions within socialism, or will there be contradictions within communism? The dilemma is: If you answer that question yes, then you have devalued the permanence of that regime that you are defending. If you answer that question no, then you have devalued the validity of the theory which is at the basis of your claim to legitimate power. Socialist theorists have met this dilemma by inventing the concept of non-antagonistic contradictions. The idea is: The contradictions in bourgeois society are irreconcilable by any means other than a revolution, which will usher in the next phase. The contradictions in socialist society, on the other hand, are non-antagonistic. They are caused by such differences in tempo, let us say, as the rapidly growing material possibilities for Soviet consumption versus the even more rapidly growing rising expectations of the Soviet consumer. Yes, those are contradictions, but they can be resolved without irreconcilable antagonisms, there being no antagonistic classes. They are resolved by the method of criticism and self-criticism. They do not put the system in jeopardy.

So, now returning to the debate with Mr. Spolin, "Our contradictions are non-antagonistic, and we really have nothing to fear."

"If you really have nothing to fear," I said to him, "and you, nevertheless, want to preserve enough coercion to prevent the possibility of disorder, could you at least allow the dissidents, if they want to, to emigrate?"

"Well," he said, "haven't you been reading the press? I know you follow parts of the Soviet press. Do you follow only those parts that it's in your interest to follow as a cold warrior? We would have let Pasternak go out. We would have let Solzhenitzyn go out. We let Tarsis go out. We are letting more of those Jews go out."

"Now, look," I said, "Pasternak was told that he wouldn't be allowed back, if he should go out, and he declined. Solzhenitzyn knows very well that he won't be allowed back if he should go out, and he's declined. If they think that their future is with their people, if they believe that their literary roots cannot be cut in this way, then why can't you let them go

out and then come back, preserving those controls that you want to preserve? As for the Jews, you talk of letting them out, but the rate at which you're letting them out now, even after this supposed liberalization, is too small to equal the natural increase in the Jewish population, even at its lower estimate of three and a half million; so that you're not letting them out in any way but tokenism."

"Emigration," he said, "is indeed a sore point with us. We are conscious that the eyes of the world are upon us. If emigration assumed massive proportions, the prestige loss would be very great. And I know what you're thinking, Mr. Lipson. You're thinking that the prestige loss would be deserved, because it would show that people are voting with their feet. That's not so. These would be unstable, politically immature people, deceived by Western propaganda, combined with the heritage of their petty-bourgeois family past. For their own good, we must keep them in until they understand what is the truth, that their best future lies within the Soviet Union."

"Well," I said, "you seem to have, Maxim L'vovich, what I call a self-sealing argument. Any objections to the moral value of that which you officially propagate are met with a kind of reference to the general teaching, which can't possibly be verified or refuted by any empirical fact, so that heads you win, tails I lose. Is that the way you look at it?"

"Well," he said, "you've made a debating point. I would rather put it in the way in which Ilyichev put it a few years ago when he was head of propaganda. I would put it as the difference between Pravdochki and Pravda, between truthlets and truth, between facticles and fact. Those who blacken Soviet reality, whether they are critics on the outside, or scribblers on the inside, or parasites, or hooligans, or the pampered sons of the Soviet official elite, of whom we have a few — they can point to any number of negative truthlets. The Soviet Union is a very large complicated place," Mr. Spolin went on. "Anybody who is seeking negative facts can find more than he can possibly put into his card indexes. The problem is one of perspective. The problem is to keep at the forefront of one's attention the great big positive truths, the truths of Marxism-Leninism, the truths of the leading role of the Party, and the validity of its general line."

"Yes," I said, "I'm familiar with that. But what is it that guarantees that that truth is true? Is it proof against any number of negative facts, however damaging, however adverse?"

"Well," he said, "there are some things that cannot be understood except by someone who is already mentally and spiritually prepared to understand them."

And then he quoted to me a very interesting letter that had only recently been unearthed, from a Soviet commissar and intellectual of the early period, to a Soviet writer. This was from Lunacharsky to Pil'nyak, in 1921, a comment on a manuscript that Pil'nyak had sent to him. And in the course of that letter, in which, in effect, Lunacharsky said to Pil'nyak anticipating Ilyichev, "You have a lot of truthlets there, but you missed the truth." Lunacharsky said, "You will never feel the revolution. You draw the external features of its physiognomy more clearly than I, or others, but I neither want nor need to look at the revolution through your microscope. I know that if I were to look through a microscope at the most beautiful woman, a woman I loved, all I could see would be some rather uninteresting and perhaps even repulsive tissues. In order to hear the music of the unique and eternal moment in the growth of the spirit, we must be not completely blind, like Homer, but somewhat blind to all the trifles of reality."

"Well," I told Mr. Spolin, "that's poetically said. I would rather it were not said by a man in Lunacharsky's official position. If it were in that polity, that would seem rather grim to me; to have someone with intellectual pretensions in the seat of political power is not an unmixed blessing. But I can see the point. However, it does seem to me that what you have done, in effect, is confirm my allegation that you are really equipped with self-sealers. Heads you win, tails we lose, at least on the scoreboard that you keep."

"Well," he said, "we're confident that our way is the best. We've made enormous strides. Remember, we were a backward country in 1915 and 1917, and now we're the second power in the world."

"Backwardness," I said, "is a complex phenomenon. You were fourth or fifth among the industrial powers of the world, in 1917. In some statistics—I think in textiles, for example—you were probably even first in production, though not

in productivity. Respectable economic historians — outside the Soviet Union, of course; they wouldn't dare to say this inside the Soviet Union — have gone so far as to say that from the point of view of the Cold War, Americans or others ought to be grateful to the Bolsheviks for having seized power and thus slowed down the Russian growth rate."

"Well," he said, "of course I can't accept that. For us," he said, "confident as we are of the stormy growth of our well-being in all spheres, what we need is a conscious, planned, sustained, decisive growth. That we are achieving. We will not allow anyone to get in our way."

I said, "Do you foresee any really serious obstacles?"

"Well," he said, "of course there is the problem of the nuclear threat and your adventuristic policy. There is the problem of the petty-bourgeois phrase-making of pseudo-revolutionaries in Peking, the problem of the so-called Left."

I was familiar, of course, with the universal Soviet typographic habit of putting "Left" into quotation marks, but never "Right," since there can be real people on the right of them, but there can be no people who are really to the left of them. That's another article of faith.

"Well," he said, "those are our dangers. Inside, we have no dangers, really, at all, on the part of the dissidents. They're a handful, and we can cope with them. There is the danger from the philistines. There is a certain danger of stagnation, that's true, but we're trying to work on that." He said, "Mr. Lipson, you keep goading me to admit that something or other has to be changed in the Soviet Union. Well, yes, I'll admit that some things have needed changing, but they are in the course of being changed. After all, it was Lenin who said that we have to scoop up with both hands the best from abroad. We're no longer as isolationist, in certain ways, as we used to be. We still think that the doctrine of peaceful coexistence, in the realm of ideology, is unacceptable; on the other hand, there's nothing wrong with our borrowing techniques. And, indeed, we're borrowing a lot of techniques. We're borrowing input-output techniques from our own Leontiev, now in your country. We have rehabilitated sociology. We are studying our own Baptists with sociological tools, to see what makes them tick and what makes them preserve their hold on a regrettably politically backward fraction of our population.

We're studying, by historical investigation, the origin of the one-party system. We are studying, by means of natural science and medical research workers, the empirical success of traditional Tibetan healers among certain tribes. We're not too fastidious, we're not animated by false pride and refusing to borrow from one technique or another."

And I said to him, "Do you think that the use of these empirical techniques of investigation will lead to any interesting modifications in Marxist theory?"

He said, "Oh, no. We know how to work with Marxist theory, and we're finding that it is absolutely adequate to all these new ideas, to computer techniques, to input-output, to empirical social science, and we do not expect that any of the definitions will be changed, only the content of the definitions."

"Well," I said to him, "Mr. Spolin, of course there's a lot in favor of your regime, by your own lights. But if that's the case, why couldn't you simply open it up a little bit? Couldn't you afford more?"

He said, "I've had enough of this talk about opening up, really. Look at your own polity. Here I've been on the defensive all this time. But look at your military controls, for example. All you have to do is look at the prominence of your military in your total State budget, and see how active a role what you call defense plays in it."

"Well," I said, "but our military are very conscious of their auxiliary role. They're on tap but not on top, and they believe in the supremacy of civilian government."

He said, "Oh, is that so? Really. Well, the news we get from Vietnam doesn't seem to confirm that."

"Well," I said, "look, I haven't talked about the Moscow subways; don't you talk about Vietnam."

He said, "You know, we talk about violence and suppression of human freedoms. I will concede that in the fifty-odd years of Soviet power, we have killed more communists in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe than you, plus the Nazis, plus the Indonesians, have, all put together. On the other hand, you, probably, have killed or imprisoned or concentrated or resettled or driven from their homes, more non-communists than we have."

What could I tell him in response to that, other than that each ruling group heaps up a higher score by persecuting those victims who are within reach, and what makes a victim eligible is not so much his politics as his proximity.

At this point we had to break off. I should explain, to those of you have not already divined it, that Maxim L'vovich Spolin is an imaginary construct, invented for the purpose of this talk. It seems to me that for Mr. Spolin, or those behind him — because all of the things that I've said he said have been said by one Soviet speaker or another — there may be, for part of this dialogue, no answer to make to him that runs deeper than the answer made by Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and they are us."