

CITIZEN USTINOV Lest we Forget

by

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An acquaintance recently mentioned Peter Ustinov in a nostalgic reverie. I listened in silence for I've always felt a great ambivalence toward the masterful comic and satirist, because he was such an adroit apologist for the Soviet Union. If all actors are liberals, most liberals, in my experience, are superb method actors. Conservatives continue to drone, lower and bump into things. Progressive liberal ardour remains virtuosic and often shrill. Peter, I think, was a genius because it rarely showed. As one enthusiastic reviewer of Mr. Ustinov's TV special *RUSSIA* (pre-perestroika Russia) put it, 'Mr. Ustinov just doesn't examine prejudice, he subverts it.' Herein then, a few unexcelled examples of this friendly slate cleaning:

Mr. Ustinov's first map of Russia (on his opener program) was rather small: Russia at the dawn of history. Then, after a commercial — Russia, rather the U.S.S.R., expanded to eleven time zones. No explanation offered, not even the customary hint of a Ustinov smile. Instead, Mr. Ustinov assured us he would examine the roots of 'anti-Soviet prejudice, which affects our thinking, sometimes without our knowing it.' Lest we forget.

Next, we were told that the Russian public was 'skeptical' of the peace of mind brought by nuclear weapons.' That the Soviets then had a huge and growing nuclear arsenal reminds one that the skeptics don't always win out. Then Mr. Ustinov presented us with an embalmed prehistoric cadaver that had been preserved in the tundra permafrost — in the 'vast empty space of Siberia.' 'Not so empty after all,' he assured us. He then sadly remarked on the amazing lifelike quality of this

human from the hoary past. 'A mouth about to speak...eyes easily disturbed....' I believe it was the journalists Vladimir Solovyov and Elena Klepikova in their book, **Yuri Andropov, A Secret Passage into the Kremlin**, who first described, for me, the bodies of recent, very historic but nameless persons (prisoners) randomly frozen in the same arctic permafrost, their bodies sheared off by bulldozers, worked by indentured labourers, clearing the trench for the trans-Siberian pipeline — undoubtedly each corpse with 'a mouth about to speak.' Please recall Mr. Ustinov's advice to Morley Safer on Sixty Minutes, 'Their experiment (the Soviets) is not yet complete.' So be patient.

Next: Orthodox religious art was presented with fine condescension against a moving performance of a soloist in a majestic Orthodox church, over voiced by the impartial Mr. Ustinov, who told us in a matter-of-fact whisper that a closed or open church is of minor importance (for whom he didn't say), that what was important was 'the quality of the expression.' Not something you entrust to a mere believer. Then Mr. Ustinov proceeded through anecdote to burlesque the Russian conversion to Christianity — the Constantinople bishops were the least offensive, he tells us. The least. Next, he broached the question of political freedom and indoctrination, suggesting how absurd the notion of mind control — this observation not in a university or public lecture hall, but a sports arena and circus! Do these people look inhibited, he asked? A hockey arena crowd a measure of political, philosophic dissent. Such trust, in one so loyal to burlesque? I couldn't help wondering if the Moscow hippodrome then housed the pundits instead of bookies? Many people, note, have commented — both émigrés and visitors — on the cowed (the comparatively subdued) nature of Russian Soviet-era sports' audiences.

Then more up-to-date Russian history, much of it 'peevish' in disposition, a tiny bit marked by 'consultation'. Yet throughout Mr.

Ustinov assured us the hardy Russian spirit has prevailed, a toughness he deemed necessary for both Russian masculinity and femininity, which (so help me) he said made Russians endure lineups and chronic inconvenience! I dare say the average Novgorod housewife may not have considered her femininity that sacrosanct.

While the post-card perfect travelogue images played on.

Peter Ustinov was, in his heyday, a life-time devotee of the antic posturing many people found entertaining: fondly blazé, saintly bathetic, dryly and coyly derisive, ever so faintly praising the soiled and bedevilled plodder. How readily he took to children, his own kind he said, whom he took 'seriously', and usually appeared at his best playing — who else? — a thoughtful young imbecile. There were and likely still are a lot of mouths 'about to speak' in the Siberian permafrost. To overlook — even upstage! — that suffering was, until very recently, to move onto the next level of negotiation.