

Mikhail Gorbachev: The Last Days of the Presidency

Yuri Shchekochikhin

November was tense and wet in Moscow and it seemed that anything that could happen, had already happened. In the lonely yard of the House of Artists on the Crimean Embankment, deposed statues of leaders of the Revolution were staring blankly into the sky. KGB Chief Vladimir Kryuchkov and other plotters had moved into the cells of the old Moscow jail, Matrosskaya Tishina, and everything, everything was changed. But in the air there was a feeling that not everything had changed yet; there would be more changes. The year of 1991 was coming to an end, and together with it, the epoch of Mikhail Gorbachev.

I have never wanted to be close to leaders. Even in my naive youthful dreams, I never imagined that one of our leaders, say Brezhnev (the greater part of my journalistic career was during his regime), would suddenly wish to meet such a nice journalist as myself. No, we were working in different spheres. These portrait people interested me much less than some young delinquent who had for no reason killed a passerby on a street at night, or a poet whose poems were mercilessly banned by censors year after year, or just a colleague--a friend with whom one could while away a night discussing eternal questions of what to do and who is to blame, over a bottle of wine. The same with Gorbachev.

By the will of fate, though, I was drawn into politics and became a deputy. At the Congress of People's Deputies or at the parliamentary sessions, leaders came so close that one could not only touch them, but also step on their feet in an isle by chance or start some senseless conversation with them. I never rushed with my colleague deputies to catch Gorbachev's word during an interval between sittings, or formed a tight circle around him risking a sharp elbow from one of his

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bodyguards.

But then in November 1991, Gorbachev became different. Betrayed by his immediate entourage in the days of the August coup, losing power day after day, cursed in shop lines and ridiculed in newspapers--it was that Gorbachev whom I wanted to meet. His post as president still placed him among the privileged "heaven dwellers." But the misfortunes which had befallen him in 1991, the last year of his presidency (everybody understood that year or at least the beginning of the next year would be the end, the finish, the windup), made him a more interesting human being for me--made him similar to other people about whom I write.

I found one person from his immediate entourage, and he said, "Write a message for him, I'll pass it over, we'll see...." I sat down and wrote something like: "Dear Mikhail Sergeevich, I would like to meet you to discuss issues of the current movement." I put my signature, telephone and fax numbers. This was on Wednesday. On Thursday, around noon when I came to the office, they were looking for me already. At 5:00 o'clock, I was to be received by Mikhail Gorbachev.

I dialed the Kremlin number left with our secretary, Svetlana, and got instructions where exactly I was to go. Then I was asked to contact Gorbachev's press secretary, Andrei Grachev. I asked him, "Andrei, tell me, may I record the conversation?" "Oh no," Andrei answered, "perhaps at the end of the conversation; and ask three questions, not more." Oh this number three! When in March 1992, President Bush gave his consent for the interview for *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, his advisor said to me, "but only three questions." Why should they choose this magic number three? To tell the truth, it was indeed that way with Bush. The fourth question that I asked him had remained unheard. But this was not the main issue.

"Are you going to see him in these clothes?" my friends asked me, pointing at my worn out jeans which I usually wore to work. With a sigh, I went home to change into my only evening jacket, the one with a deputy's pin on the lapel. I called this my "parliamentary" jacket. I had two ties which were presented to me by my friends. I reluctantly put one on, but only when I remembered that there are rules of the game which one must observe--no matter whether one likes them or not.

I was going to the Kremlin. During the two years of my work as a deputy, I came here quite often. I knew all the corners, and I was never lost in the passages and entrances. But I had never been inside

the building where Gorbachev's residence was. I knew a lot about Gorbachev, and probably like everyone I had gone the whole way from belief to doubt, from respect to disappointment. And for the first time, I was to see him eye to eye. Though not quite so.... We had met once before, but it is very unlikely that he remembered that casual meeting, and if I remembered it, it was only for one reason: not because it was the first time I had the honor to shake hands with a Soviet leader, but because of the circumstances of the handshake. I was not a deputy yet. But already, I started to get invitations to various foreign symposiums and most important, they unconditionally let me go. The Aspen Institute of West Berlin was holding a symposium, "East-West," or something of this kind. Arriving in Bonn, I found myself as if I was in the uneventful days of Brezhnev's stagnation: all over the city there were portraits of the leader (not Brezhnev of course, but Mikhail Sergeevich), who was on an official visit to West Germany. The "Gorbymania" of the Germans grew to such fantastic proportions that when my friend John Cohen (chief of the Moscow office of *Time*) asked one elderly lady in Bonn what she thought of Gorbachev's visit, he got the following answer: "I am so happy, so happy...I felt such happiness only in 1933."

Gorbachev's visit and our seminar went their own separate ways without crossing each other. We were having sessions, wandering around in the city, having lunch with Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, and taking photographs with President Richard von Weizsäcker. Suddenly one day, two other Soviet citizens and I were told urgently to go to the presidential palace for the farewell ceremony. Gorbachev would be pleased to see his compatriots! We were brought in a car, taken through the lines of the guards (I remember a helicopter appeared over the palace lawn from time to time, protecting the leaders from a possible air attack), and we were dropped off somewhere. There were the "running guards" (judging by the jackets they were Soviet), awkward Soviet-made government ZIL cars, and faces familiar from photographs. And then he, himself, was getting out of the first ZIL car. Then he (Gorbachev), von Weizsäcker, and their wives started to review the guests standing along the perimeter of the lawn. Closer, closer, closer he came. He stopped, surprised as it seemed to me, and tried to understand with difficulty why it was arranged by protocol to stop in front of these people. Then he reached with his hand guessing that we were not German but Soviet, and asked, "What do you think of our visit?" "I think it's fine," I answered. He said, "We are together at last."

Some Germans, with whom I had gotten acquainted recently, ran up to me saying, "Yuri, Yuri, what did Gorbachev tell you?" I replied, "That we are together again...well, not quite so...at last, we are together again!" What could it mean? Even I wasn't sure, not to mention my new German acquaintances, who were puzzled.

I have three versions. I started thoughtfully: first, he mistook me for one of his guards, who he thought that he had already lost. Second, for some reason he decided to tell me that he and Raisa Maximovna were together again. I remember him making a dramatic pause, letting people laugh. My third version is that his words may have meant: "Russia and Germany are together again." Probably, it was this that General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev (not yet president) was referring to several months before the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The ruins of this awful wall buried the Cold War and brought closer the events which nobody suspected: the collapse of the whole system defining the essence and the conflicts of the whole 20th century. Then, years later in 1991, there was the political resignation--from the man who had destroyed the system without suspecting his role in history. Or did he suspect? Did he know? Was he moving towards it? I was going to him without a single prepared question, but not because his consent was obtained so unexpectedly. I was interested not so much in his opinion on this or that aspect of our life, but rather in his personality during these dramatic days. Did he suspect what would happen to the country and to him? Did he know? Had he arrived at random, or gone where he was supposed to?

My deputy ID card saved me from many formalities which would have appeared on my way to visit the leader of the country. The first check point was near the Borovitsky gate. The second was on the square, on the way to his residence. The third was at the gate leading to his entrance. The fourth was at his entrance. Elderly ladies in the checkroom asked, "Are you going to stay here long?" I replied, "It depends, why?" "We have to leave soon. If you stay long, take the coat yourself..." they said to me. A guy from the press service took me to his floor. "Did Stalin have his office here?" I asked. He replied, "I don't think so. One level lower Brezhnev had his office..." There was a wooden partition, and three guards; one of them was speaking in a low voice into the telephone receiver. Then I heard, "This way please." More guards were at the door. His reception room was much smaller than I had expected, I thought to myself. The secretary said, "artist Ernst Neizvestny and writer Yuri Koryakin are with him now. You'll

have to wait." I sat down, making small talk with his secretary. The secretary was smiling and kind. I noticed that the computer on the table was from Korea. I asked, "Why not from Japan?" The secretary replied, "Oh, we have problems with this." "What do you mean?" I was surprised. She asked, "Where can we get money for an expensive computer?"

It was 5:00 o'clock, 5:15, 5:30.... Some people from the president's office looked in. "Hell," one of them said, "At six o'clock, he has one more meeting...." The door opened and the general director of TASS, Vitaly Ignatenko, showed Ernst Neizvestny out of the room. He nodded to me and made a gesture with his hands; "We are still talking." It was 5:45.... The secretary glanced at the clock more and more often. At six o'clock, the door opened and Nikolai Travkin came in, "You are here too? When do you have an appointment?" I answered, "Five o'clock, and you?" He said, "Six o'clock."

At last, the door opened and Gorbachev's press secretary Andrei Grachev, his advisor (who stayed with Gorbachev in Foros, Crimea, the days of the coup) Chernyaev, Ignatenko, Ernst Neizvestny, and last, Yuri Koryakin came out. At seeing Travkin and me, Koryakin exclaimed, "Oh, all have come together." "All" because he, Travkin and I are from the same Inter-Regional Group of People's Deputies, the original parliamentary opposition group. We have treated each other with long-time sympathy. The secretary came into his room. In a minute, he returned and opened the door saying, "Mikhail Sergeevich is waiting for you." Gorbachev came up to me and invited me to take a seat at the round table in the corner of the room. Without pausing, he began to tell me with what difficulty the talks were progressing with the leaders of republics in Novo-Ogarevo and how someone (I didn't understand who) was dreaming of the disintegration of the Union. And then, I opened my bag and put the recorder on the table. "Don't do it," he raised his hand in protest. "Mikhail Sergeevich...." "Please don't," he repeated. "I am a journalist first, and a politician second," I replied. "Ok," he said after a short pause and I pushed the record button.

Our conversation lasted exactly an hour, and it seemed to me (though I may be mistaken) that he wouldn't have sent me out of the room if I had asked him a couple more questions. But knowing that Travkin must have been calling me names sitting in the reception room, I stood up. Gorbachev got up from the table, "Well, this cassette," he nodded at the recorder, "will be to remember our meeting by." I replied, "No, Mikhail Sergeevich...this is not for memory; this is for

publishing in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*." He thought for a second and said, "All right. Only I have a request. Please, show me the text before the publication." "Of course. Only how shall I get it to you?" I replied. He said, "Tell them," he pointed at the door, "Tell the guy there. He will give you a telephone number." And suddenly, he added, "Show only me...nobody else."

When I was walking along the deserted Kremlin grounds, I began to understand that something was unusual in our conversation. I couldn't understand at once what exactly, but at last it occurred to me that he used the official Russian polite form of address "you" (Вы) not the informal "you" (ты) as was his habit as a Communist party boss to call everyone under him, irrespective of age or social standing. Yes, something was happening to him. I spent half a night deciphering the recorded text, having a hard time because our conversation was accompanied by some background noise, making words difficult to understand. This was either because the batteries were going down or because his room was equipped with something to prevent the recording of normal human conversations.

The next morning in my office, one of my colleagues said, "No, he won't agree to publish this." "We'll see," I said with self-assurance. I wrote a message to Gorbachev saying the following, "Mikhail Sergeevich, what came of our conversation will be published by the editorial board in the next issue of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, which will be on Wednesday. If you have any comments, please have them handed in before 1 p.m. on Monday."

The next day was Saturday. The first half of the day I was busy and in the afternoon when I came home, I had phone calls and long conversations. Then during a break, the phone rang and I heard the voice of the TASS general director, Vitaly Ignatenko, "Your phone has been busy for two hours. Gorbachev's people can't get through to you." I dialed the number of his reception room, "We can't get through to you...Mikhail Sergeevich is talking to President Bush now...please, don't keep the telephone busy." For about two hours, I was telling my friends, who were calling me, to call later because I was waiting for a call from somebody. In two hours, I made a call to the Kremlin again. Upon hearing that Mikhail Sergeevich was still busy, I said that unfortunately I couldn't wait longer and would call on Monday.

That day, I came home about midnight. I turned on the answering machine, and heard a phrase repeated many times monotonously, "Gorbachev's reception room secretary calling...." I dialed their number

and heard, "Are you at home already? Can we bring a parcel to you?" Half an hour later, the door bell rang and a silent man handed me the parcel from the Kremlin. In the text of our conversation, the president crossed out five or six phrases (his, not my text) and changed some of his words.

The next Wednesday, the interview which I called "Every Nation is an Aspect of God" took a whole page of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*. He had just returned from a trip to Siberia, probably not suspecting that it was his last presidential trip. That is why I started our recorded conversation with such a question:

YS: "Before the recent trip to Irkutsk and Bishkek, you did not see the country for a long time. Have you noticed anything new now?"

MG: "People are not losing their heads. Everybody is tired of political chatter; they would like to see progress. Do you know what all the recent opinion polls show? Now, more people are for the Union than there were in March. Life has taught a lesson to many people. And the necessity of preserving the state organization is recognized today on the personal, everyday level of life."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, according to our forecasts, the Ukraine will vote for independence."

MG: "What is bad about it?"

YS: "As for me, I don't see anything bad."

MG: "Everybody has proclaimed independence already. But what is independence? If somebody wants to interpret independence as a breach with other nations then that is a juggling act. Independence is a greater degree of freedom."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, in the Ukraine, I was surprised by the quick transformation of Party leaders. Yesterday, they were struggling against Rukh and turned down any possibility of secession from the Union. Today, their stance has become more rigid than that of the leaders of the Ukrainian Republican party. You know many of them. They were your colleagues, fellow Communists. It seems to me that today many Party functionaries want to wash their hands of the past. Perhaps even

to suppress their inferiority complex caused by the harsh Party dictatorship."

MG: "Then let's go to the initial point and everything will be in its place."

YS: "Which point is it for you?"

MG: "The August coup. A telegram with an appeal to support the coup came to the leaders of the Ukrainian Communist party. The telegram consisted of two paragraphs, and the Ukrainian Central Committee transformed it into an appeal of one and a half pages. They became active supporters of the coup leaders."

YS: "I didn't know it."

MG: "The most interesting thing is that after the coup, the Supreme Soviet was convened in Kiev, at which a decision was made to have a referendum on independence--meaning secession from the Union. Only a few deputies voted against. It appeared that people who had called themselves supporters of the Union suddenly sided with the extreme separatists. Such is the situation."

YS: "Was it unexpected for you, such a quick transformation of your fellow Party members?"

MG: "Everything is more serious here. What do our personal feelings, impressions, worries mean? Time is historic and crucial today, and all personal feelings should be moved to the background. Today, the top priority is to preserve the country and the community of nations, to preserve the human world and our international world in which human fate has been so interwoven that no one can sort it out. Even Jesus Christ cannot undo these knots. A year and a half ago I said: God save the people of the Ukraine from supporting extreme separatist tendencies. It's a shame when the Russians and the Ukrainians are brought to confrontation."

YS: "This was often done on purpose. Destroy, set people against each other...I remember a lecturer of the regional committee of the Communist party in Lugansk coming to the regional statistics

administrative office to give a lecture on the topic, "Rukh against statistics."

MG: "It is a question of the fate of our country. Never in history have totalitarian, dictatorial regimes relied on state property. Only here! All others have existed under private property, and that is something different. The task which has arisen before us is absolutely new. And it is a multinational country. People bring back to life the process of searching for self-knowledge and for their roots. Every nation, big or small, is an aspect of God. No one has the right to refuse a nation, especially a small one, the right to learn and get to know itself. All this adds to our problems. Plus the country is vast. Plus the suppression of dissidence (this is characteristic of all totalitarian regimes), and the political monopoly on ideas constantly had to be reformed. Do you think it is so easy to come to democracy using only one lever--glasnost, speech, and not force?"

YS: "But perhaps, and I heard about it more than once, the way for us to move from a totalitarian regime to democracy is by using a totalitarian method?"

MG: "Perhaps, authoritarian."

YS: "Like in Georgia?"

MG: "I think that is an anomaly. At the fifth Congress of People's Deputies, I came up to the deputies from Georgia and asked what was happening in Georgia. The answer was, 'Mikhail Sergeevich, don't interfere; or you will be made dirty. We'll settle everything ourselves.' I think that the situation is hard there. It is not a normal situation for the Georgian people who are clever, talented, and democratic. I always recall Merab Mamaidashvili. We were not only students together, but also visited our future wives in the same room of the student dormitory. Merab was not only the embodiment of a great philosopher; he had outstanding morals as well."

YS: "Recently, a Georgian student boy came to our editorial office. He was practically thrown out of the institute for a rally which he had organized in memory of Merab."

MG: "Did they throw him out there?"

YS: "Yes, in Tbilisi."

MG: "Incomprehensible."

YS: "Back to what you said: How should we go to democracy? From a totalitarian, as you said, to an authoritarian regime?"

MG: "My idea is that for the first time in the long history of our country, we will pass turning points without bloodshed."

YS: "But there is a lot of blood now!"

MG: "You know, I'll tell you plainly. It hasn't come to large-scale bloodshed yet."

YS: "It may come to that."

MG: "One must do everything to prevent it. That is why my task is to promote the democratic process and most importantly to involve people in it. Yes, today there are difficulties with one, or another, or a third thing. But, one can't lose that which we had been trying to achieve for a long time, and to which we couldn't break through. That is, to the oxygen, spiritual freedom, political freedom--to that which makes one a real person. That atmosphere is what makes the values and principles real, allowing one to become a personality. Yes, we need order, but not the order that the coup leaders wanted. No, people don't want to part with what they have acquired."

YS: "Though of course, nostalgia is immense now. The reason is either fatigue or completely empty shelves in shops."

MG: "Both. In Irkutsk I saw that people's patience was coming to an end. Nevertheless, I understood their aspirations. I felt that people understood the whole burden of responsibility which lay on the shoulders of the president."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, during your trips can you always tell the real situation, the truth, from 'showcase villages', which they show you? Do

you distinguish 'shepherds and shepherdesses' that are picked out from the crowd in an effort to please you?"

MG: "Of course! There is no need for them to even try. Everything is absolutely clear to me. I know everything without it. We came to a commercial store in Irkutsk--the shelves were heaped with goods, but it appeared that the previous night refrigerators full of produce had been specially brought to the store. Though people say the situation in commercial stores is different from the situation in state stores, all the same, it is better in commercial stores. To tell the truth, the prices are higher there."

YS: "Does it mean that truthful information about what is happening in the country reaches you?"

MG: "Yes, it does. And letters reach me, including abusive ones."

YS: "I know that before the coup a lot of false information was sent to you; Kryuchkov passed it to you through Boldin."

MG: "Such information was coming to me consistently. Their aim was to bring me to introduce emergency measures. Not only biased information was selected consistently, but events were even set up so that on their basis misinformation could be later created."

YS: "What do you mean?"

MG: "On the instructions from the Central Committee of Russia, we would go somewhere to organize a meeting with the Party secretaries, and, where it was possible, with high rank-and-file Communists--truly, this was more difficult. It was easier with secretaries, government bodies, plenary meetings, etc. And later, there were resolutions of protests making demands on me. Demands with ultimatums! And I felt that these resolutions were written back in Moscow even before the trips to the place."

YS: "Do you know that to create the mass character of rallies whole busloads of 'participants' were brought from Byelorussia?"

MG: "I didn't know it. By the way, very harsh demands were coming

from Lithuania before the January events and not only from the Communist party structures. Real hardships--the worries of retired and field officers were interwoven with the hardships which were born in the office rooms of the Central Committee of the Communist party in Staraya Ploshchad. The demands were rather harsh--to introduce presidential rule."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, even now something remains a mystery for me. On July 10, 1991, I published an article, "The Lithuanian Map," about the sinister role which the KGB played during the January events in Vilnius. On the same day, the 10th, I sent you a letter...Did it reach you?"

MG: "What was it about?"

YS: "The letter demanding the resignation of Kryuchkov and explaining what else he could do."

MG: "You know, there were many such letters. Why speak about sporadic signals! Take events starting with the all-Russian Congress of the Communist party, and then the 28th Congress. Remember what a situation developed there and what battles one had to stand? Plenum after plenum, there were exhausting battles. It was visible how the reactionary forces were rising."

YS: "But I was writing about Kryuchkov in particular! Then some days later, I got the support of several academics who sent a letter to you with similar demands--they were Shatalin, Ryzhov, Petrakov, Arbatov."

MG: "What was the letter about?"

YS: "Same as mine. Demanding the resignation of Kryuchkov as the leader of future plotters."

MG: "Somehow it escapes my memory."

YS: "This was reported in newspapers, and in the TV news program 'Vesti.' Perhaps the letters didn't reach you? Or they were hidden from you?"

MG: "Perhaps...but the theme of a coup came to the foreground all the time. Even foreign government leaders telephoned me to say that information about a possible coup was coming to them."

YS: "Who called you, for instance?"

MG: "Suddenly an urgent call from President Bush came, 'There is information...sorry, but I can't hide it from you. I must say, perhaps it is not serious, but tonight there will be a coup.'"

YS: "Yes, everybody felt that they would do it."

MG: "Somehow we have all done our business. I consider my mission to be fulfilled: society has changed so that every attempt of a coup is doomed. That is why, I thought, if those who intend to have a coup possess at least a drop of common sense even from the viewpoint of their own selfish interests, they would have to calculate everything 5-6 moves ahead. So they had to understand that they would be covered with shame and defeat."

YS: "Nevertheless, when it happened, it was unexpected for you? As you said more than once, you suffered not only because of the coup, but also because people from your immediate entourage were involved."

MG: "Of course, I also spoke about a great moral damage. For example, take Kryuchkov. Now attempts are being made to prove that he was a limited narrow-minded man...."

YS: "Well, no. The commission investigating the activity of the KGB has established that he was making his own thorough preparations for everything. It has become known that telephone conversations of Yakovlev and Shevardnadze, as well as those of people from your entourage, were taped. For example, telephone conversations of Vitaly Ignatenko, then your advisor on press issues, were taped. As it became known to me, volumes of recorded conversations of Ignatenko with Yakovlev, Shevardnadze, and you were discovered in Boldin's safe. Even Lukyanov's conversations...."

MG: "His phone was tapped?"

YS: "Yes...I don't know whether it was done in the room in which we are now."

MG: "Who knows. One can't be sure of anything now, but at that time, I thought that they wouldn't do it. But I would like to continue about Kryuchkov. Besides all that I knew, it meant a lot to me that Kryuchkov had the support of Andropov."

YS: "Was Andropov's opinion very important to you?"

MG: "With all his drawbacks--I don't want to idealize Andropov, or his ideological concepts, or his part in the struggle against dissidents; it was all very clear to me. He was a man of great intellect and utterly opposed to corruption. I had a long-time connection with him. I shouldn't say that we had very close relations, but I knew him well and we met regularly. I chose Kryuchkov because Andropov thought well of him. Where else can I find people for this sphere? Andropov's attitude to Kryuchkov was a criterion to me. One shouldn't make people look primitive. Could you call Kryuchkov or Lukyanov limited persons?"

YS: "I would call Yanayev limited."

MG: "I didn't know Yanayev so well...but this is not the point. The main thing is their political stance. They saw where the new draft program of the Party and the Novo-Ogarevo process were going, and in that new life they did not see themselves. That is, deep differences were revealed."

YS: "Up to now, I can't understand why they flew to Foros. It was clear that the coup had failed."

MG: "The second time?"

YS: "Yes, when it was all clear. Why? Why fall to your feet? Or what? I don't see logic in the act."

MG: "Neither do I."

YS: "Is that visit a mystery for you too?"

MG: "Of course. They may have thought that if they did not shed blood, everything would be forgotten. This is too much. No, it may have been just panic. They panicked as soon as they made themselves known. When they came here the first time, and then spread the rumor that Gorbachev was ill and so on, they understood that they would have to answer for it! And they began to lose their positions. They thought it would turn out like Khrushchev's resignation."

YS: "I am afraid it could have been worse. On the 19th, we learned in the editorial office that it might be announced that Gorbachev was mentally ill."

MG: "I think they wanted to do something like that. It was just then that Raisa Maximovna had an attack. My son-in-law, Anatoli, came with a wireless set and said that the BBC had announced that a group of people were going to visit Gorbachev. The BBC made it look like they were going to bring evidence of Gorbachev's state of health to Yeltsin and the Supreme Soviet. Raisa Maximovna said, 'it means we'll be made invalids.' I did not exclude that. But at that time, we were acting according to the laws of the state of siege and lived as in a fortress. We had sub-machine guns inside. The doctor was with us too."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, were there any unexpected figures among the coup leaders? Or could you expect that just those people would attempt a coup?"

MG: "I did not think that they would attempt a coup."

YS: "You know, Gurov told me...the former chief of the 6th administrative office of the Interior Ministry of the USSR, the anti-mafia department..."

MG: "Yes, yes I know."

YS: "Six months before the coup, they had information that one of the plotters, Starodubtsev, had smuggled audio-cassettes worth six million rubles."

MG: "Starodubtsev bought audio-cassettes? I didn't know about it, no."

YS: "When he was detained, the Council of Ministers sent a paper with instructions to return the smuggled goods to Starodubtsev. And before that they had two volumes of information on Yazov and other army chiefs who had spent several hundreds of thousands of budget money on repairs of their personal apartments."

MG: "Yazov?"

YS: "Yes, Yazov. When I found out that the plotters used to steal a little, I understood once again that politics and morals are incompatible."

MG: "Gurov didn't report to me!"

YS: "He reported to Pugo. He couldn't get through to you. He was never allowed."

MG: "I admit now that they couldn't create organizational structures but only perform trickery. To cover it up they used the military-industrial complex, turning its secrecy into an advantage. So they say, investigation and life will tell us."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, Abraham Brumberg, a very prominent American Sovietologist, has visited us recently. He said that after the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe, the whole world has had a shift to the right."

MG: "I am always asked these questions. They begin with: Who are you? A comrade Gorbachev? Or a mister Gorbachev? A Communist, a socialist or a democrat? And from the other side, the press says: Gorbachev can't renounce his socialist choice yet. Am I still captured by my illusions? No I am not."

YS: "But I am more interested in your point of view on the further development of the world process."

MG: "I don't think anyone was to realize a specially worked-out conception on the destruction of socialism. As long as man, homosapiens, exists, he'll always be in search of a better life."

Christianity is a search. Campanella** is also a search. We must say it directly, that the conception which has failed was a model of Stalin-type socialism. It was bound to fail because it contradicted the very essence of the socialist idea and to a considerable extent disclaimed it. On the other side, let's not idealize capitalist society. So far, the search should be based on drawing the two systems together and not on contradictions of the bases of the syntheses of all people's experience. The search will bring to us a more human, democratic and just society. The elements of socialization are seen everywhere. Very often, we divide the world into socialist and capitalist very primitively."

YS: "But today, the very word 'socialism' stirs up, especially in young people, hostility and even hatred."

MG: "Not in me. Because for me, socialism is connected with political and spiritual freedom, respect for culture, humanism and democratization."

YS: "That's for you. But for those who are twenty now, the word 'socialism' is more connected more with standing in line."

MG: "You can kill me but I am who I am and these are my convictions. I respect other people's convictions. Let them have theirs and let me have mine. Be they liberals, democrats, conservatives or monarchists."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, do you consider yourself a person from the 1960's generation?"

MG: "Yes."

YS: "I've heard more than once that the mistakes of perestroika, and I think you agree that there were some, stand for the collapse of liberal ideas of the 1960s generation. Their ideas were good for that time. But when your generation came to power, it could only destroy what was in the way. And what's next? I admit that the ideas of perestroika are great, but you couldn't fulfill them to the end. Not because you became different, but because the processes are different and they need

**Tomasso Campanella was a 16th century Italian writer and poet.

different people."

MG: "Every generation bears the mark of its time, especially the generation which was formed during the social consciousness' turning point called the Khrushchev thaw. We had seen too much of that during Stalin's time. You have to admit our generation has a certain understanding of the moral values of previous generations. We neglect neither the life of our fathers nor of our grandfathers. We used to know and know now what a country they changed. I do remember very well our pre-war life. I had nothing but a t-shirt and a coat when I went to Moscow to enter the university. That was all. Though my father was a machine operator, I was a machine operator, and my mother was working, our life was very poor. That is the way it was. But I didn't think of myself as poor in general, and thought everything was okay."

YS: "Maybe it was because you thought one shirt was the norm?"

MG: "Not at all. I experienced everything, bad and good. I tried everything in my life and the year 1937 affected our family as well."

YS: "Do you mean your grandfather?"

MG: "Yes, my grandfather. My other grandfather was put on trial because he didn't fulfill the plan of the spring campaign. And it was in 1933, the famine time in the Caucasus, that three of his six children died. It was the time of rash cruelty and terrible disrespect for human lives. It was all not so simple and I have kept it all inside me."

YS: "Is your inner protest against this system of cruelty a source of your conviction as a reformer?"

MG: "If it wasn't my inward belief that everything had to be changed, I would have worked the way that they had worked before me, so to say. If I would have been like Brezhnev, I could have lived for ten years like an emperor who didn't care about the future."

YS: "I do remember these words of yours."

MG: "And do you remember also any case from world history when a

man refused power on his own wish after he got it?"

YS: "That's something that draws people to you like any unexplained phenomenon."

MG: "I thought everything would be that way because I knew the system from the inside. I worked for ten years as the first secretary of the Party regional committee. When speaking about the coup, it is said about me that 'Gorbachev keeps something back, and I am not going to tell them everything.'"

YS: "Well, yes...You repeated this enigmatic phrase several times."

MG: "And everyone thinks, what is it that he knows?"

YS: "And what is it?"

MG: "A system! A system which I have learned from the inside."

YS: "When I met Alpha's group leaders after the coup, I asked them if they could rescue the president when necessary. They answered: within 15 minutes."

MG: "Alpha belongs to me now, not to the KGB. We agreed with Boris Nikolaevich that our personal security service will be subordinated only to us."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, were you afraid of the KGB? Especially after what your own family experienced?"

MG: "No, I didn't have any fear. If I had been afraid of them, I would not have been able to do anything."

YS: "Were you on the alert with the KGB?"

MG: "I was aware of their power. What I can say now that I couldn't say before, is that I had to outmaneuver them. And the democrats didn't make it easier for Gorbachev either!"

YS: "Just remember that as soon as the right came down hard on you,

democrats, and I mean first of all the Inter-Regional Group, came to your rescue."

MG: "That's very true! Everything happened. But I am not going to talk about it right now. We must do our best to preserve what we've begun. Just look, new people are appearing in the economy. Do you agree with me?"

YS: "Yes I do."

MG: "On the political front, there are new people and there will be more."

YS: "They're appearing, they're appearing Mikhail Sergeevich. But now when walking along the streets which are as dark as during the war, when going into shops and watching the embittered faces of people, one can't but think: Will we overcome? Will the people endure all this? There is much talk about a new coup, which will make the previous one look like a musical comedy in comparison. They foretell that the crowds will rise under the leadership of Zhirinovskyy-type people."

MG: "The working people have just said this to me. Someone is waiting for the new coup and may be organizing it."

YS: "Who?"

MG: "Someone from the military-industrial complex (VPK). Someone from Party structures. We must draw a conclusion to go forward, because there is no way back for us. We need to put forward the reforms and do it methodically. More important is to give the working people a chance to prove themselves in the large state-owned enterprises. They've said to me recently: 'If you don't give us this chance, if again we are left out, then it is going to be worse than the August coup.' What did they mean? They want the same opportunities as the cooperators had. Second, they want to be the masters of their own labor. We are working in that direction now. The third is, to provide social security for teachers, doctors and military men. The business people will search for their own opportunities."

YS: "Mikhail Sergeevich, Will we survive this winter?"

MG: "Yes, we will. But all that I am talking about should be a high priority. If everything is going to be the way it is now, we won't be able to cope with the situation. That's why the preservation of the Soviet Union is my primary concern. A break of ties between the republics will cause the breakdown of industrial links and any economic cooperation."

YS: "We were glad when the senseless conflict between you and Yeltsin ended. Only mutually coordinated actions of the two of you in one boat could deliver us."

MG: "Someone isn't very happy about it."

YS: "To my mind, they have already stopped embroiling you in this conflict with him."

MG: "Far from it! I can take any newspaper and give you proof. But that is useless, especially when newspapers, which are calling themselves democratic, are waiting for the slightest possibility of a clash between us. It is like when every newspaper writes with a thrill now about the process of formulating the Union becoming more complicated."

YS: "How do you feel about being excluded from the CPSU by Nina Andreeva?"

MG: "This is like a medal for me...to heck with her."

Now when re-reading that November dialogue between us, I have a deeper understanding of what a short life all the progress of my interlocutor had, especially in the main spheres. Practically only a month later, the Soviet Union at last ceased to exist as a whole state, as one-sixth of the surface of the planet, united by one flag, national emblem and the Kremlin--no matter how hard my interlocutor tried to preserve this former reality.

Only a short time would pass after our conversation until in Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia, the bloody battles would break out. The democrat dictator, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, would have to escape and Eduard Shevardnadze would come back, after many years of absence

from Georgia. Political confrontation between the Russian and Ukrainian governments would start and there would be much bloodshed ahead.

And so far, everything which is due to have a place in history would occur, and to foretell anything is a thankless task. But my worries had no grounds as well. We did live through the winter of 1991/1992 without military coups and famine riots. To tell you the truth, I don't know whether what happened after was the most important. Perhaps the most important thing for a journalist is to slow down the stream of time, to stop it and to pick up the day which has amused him and to say: "Hold onto this moment!--you are beautiful...." Or "hold on, because you are senseless." Or very simply "hold on, because I don't understand anything about you." And this will all be--Time in which you find yourself out of the blue.

In those days between our meeting with Mikhail Sergeevich and the publishing of the interview, I had to answer one particular question very often, Who is he now? I always answered: he creates an impression of a very courageous man.

In those very days, I met one bureaucrat who was feeling all right at all times and was never affected by political cataclysms because he had such mental pliability that he could easily turn into a Muslim or a Christian within a day if necessary. That man suddenly said to me: "You've picked the wrong person for your interview; his time is over and he'll be dismissed." I was so angry with these words about him that I decided to write my own foreword for this interview. I wrote two more pages the morning before the newspaper was published and they appeared in the issue forewarning about my conversation with Mikhail Sergeevich--Who is he? The destroyer of the Empire? Or its supporter? A democrat or a Communist? A Nobel Prize winner? Or a man who destroyed the peace and order on one-sixth of the planet? The one who gave us freedom? Or the one who deprived us of elementary well-being?

I do not think that there is a more enigmatic personality in modern history than Mikhail Gorbachev. I remember a gathering in the center of Moscow. They cried in support of the orator/oracle: "Down with Gorbachev!" But I also remember those hours before daybreak in August when the crowds in front of the White House, the Russian Parliament building, screamed in delight, "Pre-si-dent, Pre-si-dent" mistaking the processions of Vice President Ruskoi or Prime Minister Silaev for those of Yeltsin's.

Gorbachev mounted the throne as a master of a military monster and won our hearts at once because he was so different from all the former masters of power. It could have been much easier if Chernenko was replaced by Grishin, Grishin by Romanov and Romanov by some leader appropriate for this role (at least we made jokes about these people). We would have led lives discussing politics in smokey kitchens, secretly reading Solzhenitsyn (risking imprisonment at least for two years for reading unauthorized books) and cursing at jammed broadcasts which prevented us from listening to Voice of America and Radio Free Europe. Gorbachev broke our habitual type of life which had been built by generations of Soviet people.

He did what could have been ruinous for his forerunners--he broke the gap between the leader and the ordinary people. Perhaps, to do this in a traditionally slave-owning country was also ruinous for his well-being. He began to be criticized. At first, they did it timidly, taking pride in their own bravery and wondering why there were no secret police cars at their doors. Then later, they did so with more confidence and energy. Only yesterday, they began their speeches wishing all the best to true Leninists. Today, they demonstrate their hatred for them, one in front of another. I understand now; it often happens in history that the loudest voices are those of slaves--of those slaves for whom the weakness of their master meant their own power.

Gorbachev made many mistakes. But why do we take in his mistakes more emotionally than the mistakes of his forerunners? Maybe it is due to the fact that he gave freedom to one-sixth of the globe and paid for this; he may yet have to pay more.

Oh, if only we were a different country! The whole world would die for such a leader! But in our country, it was not like Bush replacing Reagan--one system was replaced by another.

Maybe he is not aware himself why they curse his name in lines. He came to us not from Australia but from the Stavropol regional Party committee. From generation to generation, this society was artificially deprived of the right to private property and blamed the master for the shortage of bread and sausage. He repeated it over and over again. He was already the president of a country infamous for its spiritual freedom and its rulers' senseless cruelty over the people's choice of opinion and place of living.

We will remember him yet.

After the interview, life itself made it possible for my journalist road to cross his presidential road once again.

Several days had passed since the day of the interview's publishing, when they called my place early in the morning. They informed me that on the following day there would be a meeting with President Gorbachev and I was invited. Yes, several days had just passed, but the meeting of the three Slavic leaders, Russian, Ukrainian and Byelorussian in the Belovezhsky forest, put an end to the history of the USSR. There was no place for a president in the new Commonwealth.

Once again, I was in the Kremlin yard passing by one guard post then another. But everything was different so far. On entering the building, I listened to the lofty words of several journalists trying to argue with the attentive guards. They didn't allow them to go even a few steps towards the cloakroom without the man in charge, and he was late. "What do you think you are doing here?" said the chief of a big newspaper who was getting excited. "It's not allowed," grimaced the guard. At last, the man in charge led the way for us to the cloakroom. Then, they brought the same thing which was used at airports for security control, including the mandatory little bucket used for putting the keys and change before going through. Then they took us on a different floor to a completely different room, not the one where we met a week before. It had a long polished table and TV cameras in front of the chair on the middle of the table.

"Do you know on whose chair you are sitting now?" asked somebody from the presidential team whom I knew. He continued, "This used to be the room for the Politburo meetings and you've just taken the chair of former chief of the KGB Chebrikov." I fumbled under the table but couldn't find any special button and told those sitting next to me about it.

Gorbachev entered the room and said, "I used to sit here"--pointing to the chair at the head of the table--"when I was the General Secretary but today I'll sit next to you all. It'll be just right." He proceeded to the chair where the TV cameramen were crowded around.

I didn't write anything about the meeting because it was broadcast in detail on TV on the evening program and also because I didn't ask any questions during that meeting. But there is something that I remember very well. Suddenly, I remember a trace of resentment in his voice when he mentioned that they did not tell him the results of the Belovezhsky forest agreement first, but instead they had telephoned President Bush. And I also remember the question of some insolent and audacious guy who asked several times in that impudent mockery manner of his, "When you will resign?" And he answered, repeating the

words several times, "I am not afraid of resignation. I am sorry for the country...." "And what are you going to do after you resign? Will you stay at your dacha?" continued my insolent fellow journalist. Gorbachev replied, "Don't worry I'll find something to keep myself busy with."

After the meeting, upon leaving the room, we came face to face with him. "It seems to me, Mikhail Sergeevich, that everything which is taking place today is more of a riddle for a psychologist than for a political scientist," I said to him. I continued, "For the new republican leaders neither Moscow nor the Kremlin is the embodiment of the center--but that very room. They still remember their fear in front of it and they won't be at peace until they overcome it." He shrugged his shoulders tiredly, "And who is Kravchuk? He was fooling around in the Central Committee here..." and then he left.

And then the resignation followed. When it happened, our *Literaturnaya Gazeta* newspaper published a big picture on the front page with a Gorbachev figure vanishing from sight into the corridor.

That is all, though I have a strange feeling I haven't said something. And it is not because I haven't said that after his retirement, there was such a fuss and the new government hurried up to take his room, discussing publicly how many guards he should be allowed to have.

It is because there was one more story connected with him. Later I called Kryuchkov's lawyer on business and he suddenly said to me: "I was about to call you. Vladimir Alexandrovich says hello to you...." "Who?" I couldn't understand. "Well Kryuchkov, he respects you very much." I humbled an answer. "Well"--said the lawyer--"he has read your interview with Gorbachev and asked me to tell you that all telephone conversations of Gorbachev's staff were listened to by him due to a personal order by Gorbachev." I said something about the security line and that these problems were their own. But sometime later, a big article appeared in the newspaper *Rabochaya Tribuna* (The Worker's Rostrum) about some papers in Boldin's safe containing telephone conversations and that they included some personal notes by Gorbachev. I didn't know how to find Mr. Gorbachev or what telephone number to dial. His foundation was not yet officially opened. I called the Kremlin hoping to talk to somebody from his former staff. I found a man who stayed there to man the archives. "I can give you his new telephone number; don't tell him how you got it," the man replied. "No," I said, "it's better for you to explain what the matter is, that perhaps it is worthwhile to comment. And I will call you back."

When I called the next day, they told me that the former president

said hello to me but refused to comment on this matter. His words were, "To hell with them! You do it once and they invent something else. I don't want to do this."

History is a strange thing and it does strange things to those who try to interfere with it. We live during a new epoch now, no matter what it is, and no matter what it has in store for us. I came to a conclusion that if Gorbachev had not happened, there would have appeared another one of his kind. It was a demand of the times and any good leader was due to act like him. On the other hand, what if he had appeared not in 1985, but ten years later--the inertia of the existing power could have lasted for that time. What would we have to go through then? No matter what, we have a feeling now, a feeling which gives us strength to live--a feeling of freedom.

Only one who has lived without it is able to understand how it feels when it finally arrives.