

PEOPLE NOT GOVERNMENTS

by Timothy J. Muise

In the early 1980's to mid 1990's I was a longshoreman in Gloucester, Massachusetts. We unloaded boats from all over the world with our biggest customers being from Iceland, Japan, Germany, and South American countries. Codfish, whiting, haddock, shrimp and scallops came into our port by the millions of tons. I enjoyed the work and had no problems with the crazy atmosphere. Men who work the docks live hard, party hard, and sometimes burn out quick, but if you survive it is gratifying to make your living from sweat of the brow. I considered myself a hard man in those days.

The cold war was on strong in this country and the television portrayed what can only be described as a very anti-Russian sentiment. From what you saw of Reagan and his cabinet you got the idea missiles were on the ready and pointed at your house. The tough "cowboy" Reagan spoke like he was going to save us from the savage Commanche attack while seeking more and more money to buy Winchesters and canon balls. My youth insulated me from the real seriousness of the matter but knowing what I know today I believe it was not a proud time for this nation. Those fear tactics changed this nation in a negative way.

I reported for work one day and my boss, a really nice guy and fair employer, called me into the little shack we used as an office. He told me how Russian ships were going to be docking in Gloucester and that our company would be offloading several million pounds of shrimp from them. Of course I was excited as this meant overtime for me and possibly a shrimp dinner or two, and neither one of us was really concerned with the political ramifications of the event. These would be the first Russian ships to make port in the United States since the beginning of the cold war. The significance of that did not strike me at that time, but I would soon learn one of the most important lessons of my life.

A gigantic russian ship entered Gloucester's outer harbor. I had to wait at the Rogers Street dock until high tide to receive the lines from this vessal as it drew too much water to come in at any other tide level. At high tide I received the lines, fore and aft, and placed the gangway up to the railing of the ship. The first person on board wore a red arm band and was carrying a pump shotgun. This was not the norm. He placed his back to the top of the gangway, paying no mind to who was boarding the ship, it was clear that his concern was who might leave the ship. I later learned he was KGB and was on "defector" patrol. What kind of country would stop its people from leaving? I briefly pondered the question.

My boss and I climbed the gangway and boarded the ship. The KGB guard gave us a smug look but otherwise paid us little mind. The captain of the ship and first mate both spoke really good english. My boss went with the captain to his quarters to discuss business and I went with the first mate to open the cargo holds we would be working. Many crew members were emerging from the cabin, all seemed to be smiling, much unlike the KGB guard. I spoke to the first mate about beer, cigarettes, vodka & whiskey (all important topics to me in those days) and told him I would get him a case of Budweiser and bottle of Jack Daniels when I went to lunch. He was pleased.

After we had checked the cargo, a real easy task in this instance as it was all 70lb cases of bright orange shrimp, the mate and I headed along the railing back toward the ramp. I asked him what the KGB guard would do if a crew member attempted to leave the ship and he stated, clear eyed and serious, that he would shoot them dead. These sailors were literally hostages on their own ship. I moved past the KGB goon, who kept his evil stare, and went and hired a crew for the days sorting of cargo.

At 9:00 am "mug-up" break I went to the Liquor Locker package store and purchased a half-gallon of JD and a case of Bud talls. I climbed the gangway again, side stepped the KGB, and went to the first mate's cabin. He smiled ear to ear when he eyed the booze and beer. He set it on the table and we headed up to the ship's galley. Even though it was early they were getting ready for lunch. They asked me to stay and I accepted. The table folded out of the wall of the galley, a space saving method, and each place was set with plastic plates, cups, and even a plastic shot glass. We sat down to eat baked chicken breast, whole green pea pods, and plain boiled potatoes. They broke out a unlabeled liquor bottle and poured everyone a shot. They gave the Russian salute, "Dahsvidania!", and I downed my shot. Lord-a-gumption! This stuff was rocket fuel! Now I was a drinker in those days, 101 proof sour mash whiskey on the regular, but this Russian vodka left me speechless for about five minutes! The crew members, first mate, and captain all got a good laugh out of it.

When I emerged from the cabin, feeling pretty good, one of the guys informed me the boss had been looking for me. I caught up with him and he told me we had an issue with "visitors". I had no idea what he meant but he explained to me that people had started showing up, quite a few people, to wish the Russians well. I walked out into the parking lot and saw a group of about a dozen people gathered. They had flowers, chocolates, and placards with peace symbols. I asked the boss if he wanted me to chase them off, he said no, he wanted me to make sure they did not get injured by the offloading activity but that he did not want to stop them from wishing the Russians well. I escorted the group up to the bow of the ship, standing on the dock, and went aboard to let the crew know they had visitors. Crew members went to the bow, only a couple at first, but as soon as more learned of what was going on almost the entire crew was up there. The visitors passed their gifts up to the crew and the crew threw down cigarettes and smiled from ear to ear. I escorted about 30 people in all that first day.

The next morning there were about 50 people waiting on the dock before we even got started. The boss had me arrange pallets as a barrier as to keep them from roaming into the work area but also affording them adequate room to access the bow of the ship from the dock. When I went on board to do my job the KGB guard was glaring over toward the bow, but never left his post. He did not like the events, that was evident from his scowl, but he was not going to stop them. When I went back to my "crowd management" duties I found out that some of the folks had flown from all across the country, Seattle, Washington, California, Ohio, etc., to come here to little Gloucester, Massachusetts

to tell these Russians that they loved them as human beings. The message that it was the governments, not the people, that were at war was abundantly clear. They let these simple sailors know that it was people, not governments, that comprised a country, and that the people of this nation were kind, open, and compassionate. These folks were silencing nuclear missiles with flowers and candy. They were breaking capitalistic stereotypes with grassroots compassion and empathy. This was powerful stuff, the nature of the human soul, and I had never been aware of it before. No school could teach this.

My boss was a special guy. He was a businessman, and a shrewd one at that, but he also recognized humanity. He hired tortured souls, put up with unacceptable behavior, and knew that it was the right thing to do to let these strangers, these visitors, express their compassion to the Russian sailors. Many things were behind the fall of communism, but I got to witness one of the small chisels which chipped away at that wall of repression. I am a better man because of it. It is truly people, not governments, who will control the destiny of this world. I will choose to support the compassion of the people whenever and wherever I can.

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