

An American in Paphos

Jill Campbell Mackay talks to TIME Magazine's former Bureau Chief in Moscow, John Kohan



John Kohan meets Mikhail Gorbachev

Walk into John Kohan's study and you walk into history. Walls are lined with bookshelves filled to capacity with a wide selection of titles, from scholarly works like *Dissonant Voices in Soviet Literature*, alongside three volumes of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, and as he is a fluent Russian and German speaker, there are books in both languages plus an enviable collection of multilingual

video films, paperbacks, and a truly comprehensive set of reference titles worthy of any major city library. His unique collection of memorabilia covers over twenty years of travelling the world from China to Mexico, all of which I coveted from the moment I stepped into his Paphos home to interview him. One of my favourite items is a bust of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet Secret Police. He sits glowering



rather unwelcomingly from a wall niche, next to a splendid metal hammer-and-sickle emblem which, John explained, had once adorned the top of a red velvet Communist Party banner. One wall displays a photographic collection of John in interviewing mode, pictured with, among others, Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. A large framed poster of a cover from TIME Magazine with its distinctive red border shows a young Gorbachev beside the headline 'Moscow's New Boss', and a second poster depicting two huge eyes peering out over the Kremlin Wall with the caption: 'The KGB Today'. These and many other souvenirs all bear witness to over twenty years spent at the cutting edge of journalism, the last eight years of them as TIME's Moscow Bureau Chief. Three years ago, John moved to Cyprus having been recommended by a Russian friend to come here for his year's sabbatical, in order to write what he jokingly describes as "The Moscow correspondent book to end all correspondents books".

His original plan was to use Paphos simply as a quiet place to hang his hat, while he shuttled back and forth to Russia to gather material. But after a few months, the island began to work its magic spell on him. He found that he was fast losing interest in the Russia book, and after all the hassle to secure a multiple entry visa to Russia, he never got round to using it. In fact, when his year out of active journalism finally came to an end, he decided not to return to his job and to settle permanently on Cyprus.

Writer's block? Mid-life crisis?

"Perhaps", muses John, "but those terms sound too negative to describe what has been a healthy, positive change. My years in Moscow were full of so many earth shaking events - the collapse of the world's last great empire, the break up of this

of 1988, the Soviet Union was just beginning the perestroika reforms, and few people realised what dramatic changes were in store for them.

"At the start of my stint in Moscow," notes John, "I lived like a colonial civil servant with a maid and chauffeur in a closed compound guarded by police, there to prevent ordinary Russians from mingling with foreigners. There was no food to be found in the stores, almost everything had to be ordered via mail order. When I left Russia eight years later,

tested when Russian friends wanted him to share with them the exhilaration experienced when they could speak openly for the first time about taboo political topics or read long-forbidden books - as well as their bitter disappointment, when dreams of a real democracy failed to materialise. "I used to watch Gorbachev commute to work in his official convoy of cars from my balcony window each morning with a certain excitement," he says.

"I also watched in horrified amazement in October



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century's most monolithic political system, the end of the division of post war Europe - that I realised I could never find another news story to top this one. Those were extraordinary years and will always be a part of me but I just had this gut feeling the time had come to close the chapter, start a new life and do all the things I never had time for in my high pressured job - dabbling with poetry, having a crack at writing a screenplay, re-reading the novels of Charles Dickens, doing pencil sketches, studying Greek, and - one of my favourite activities! - learning to sit and meditate in my garden at the end of the day. Now, when I think of my time spent in Russia, it's in poetic terms, not prose."

When John first arrived in Moscow in the summer

shops were stocked with a huge variety of imported goods, but only a new class of wealthy Russians could afford them, and violent crime was such an everyday occurrence that we actually began to welcome our police protectors.

"Things became so bizarre. You could only buy one-way travel tickets to destinations within the former Soviet Union, you then had to trust in luck or a pair of strong walking shoes to get home again!"

The hardships of daily life seemed to John a small price to pay to witness some of the most dramatic events in modern history, and his position as TIME's Man in Moscow gave him unusual access to the country's leadership.

His training as a dispassionate observer was sorely

1993 as tanks below my window opened fire on the parliament building on orders from Yeltsin. That was probably the moment when I realised that the grand experiment was over."

Three years later, John abandoned his Kutuzovsky flat on a grand experiment of his own. Once he had sampled what he calls "the small town pleasures of life here in Paphos," he knew he had made the right decision to get off the surreal psychological rollercoaster ride he had been on for almost a decade, even if coming to Cyprus was, in his words, "a total fluke."

"Unlike many of my fellow Americans, I always knew where Cyprus was from maps I had studied of the Apostle Paul's missionary journeys in church Sunday school, but this just wasn't the sort of place where I would have thought of coming on vacation, much less settling down! But when I got off the plane in Paphos and saw the shimmering Mediterranean sea and the oleander bushes in bloom, it was love at first sight. So, in a way, I have Russia to thank for discovering the island."

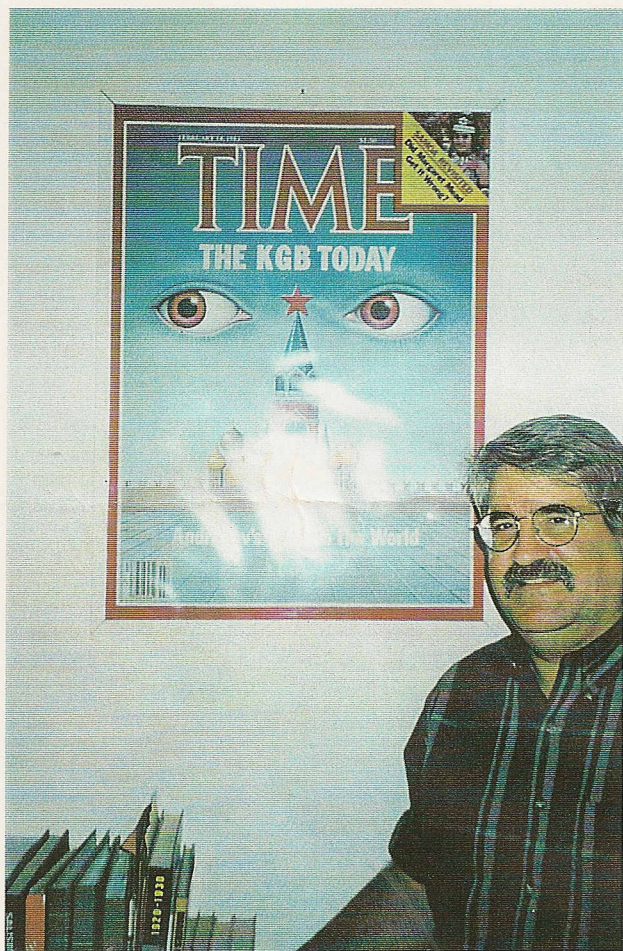
John believes that his long experience in dealing with Russians has been helpful in understanding the mindset of the Cypriots who are, he says, "relatives from the same Byzantine family." Mostly, though, he finds the island to be an intriguing world of its own, preoccupied with its own recent history and undergoing its own difficult transition from a largely peasant society to a modern European state with all the pluses and minuses. John was lucky early on to

day he will do some "personal archaeology", pull out the five volumes of diaries he kept in almost indecipherable script during his Moscow years, and think again about 'the Russia Book'. For the moment, though, he is too busy getting to know the island he now considers home.

"I had a letter recently from a close American friend who decided, like me, to make a major career change in her 40's and to give up her job in the movie industry to

collection. It evoked the perfect beauty of the landscape around the village of Tsada, and accompanying this, he had folded at the back of the framed picture a copy of a poem he had written entitled Islands.

It is at times like these that one feels both delighted and proud that Cyprus continues to draw like a magnet some truly gifted, generous, and decent people, who have put down their roots here and we, both locals and foreigners alike, can only benefit from their presence.



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become acquainted with a Cypriot who, he says, "has one foot firmly planted in each world" by working in a large luxury hotel catering to foreigners while continuing to live a more traditional life in a village near Polis.

"I am sure my friend found it strange at first that a foreigner like me wanted to help him fix up an old stone cottage and actually enjoyed the experience of pressing grapes with my bare feet. It's been an extraordinary learning curve and he's been a patient teacher. If I deserve a 'C' for cement-mixing, I'd certainly get an 'A' for house painting! More importantly, I've learned something about how to live in the present moment and how to value silence."

John does not rule out the fact that some

become a priest in the Episcopal Church.

She was writing a sermon on Christ's Beatitudes and came upon the following text in a bible commentary:

"The meaning of "blessed" ("makarios") can best be seen from one particular use of it. The Greeks always called Cyprus "makaria" which means "the Happy Island" and they did so because they believed that Cyprus was so happy, so rich and so fertile an island that a man would never need to go beyond its coastline to find the perfectly happy life." I've had days here, when I really believe this is true"

Just as I was saying good bye to John, he pressed into my hands a small package which turned out to be one of the pastel drawings I had previously admired from his

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No man is an island,
goes the poet's platitude,
as if life within sea-bounded limits
were a fate only for dying despots,
condemned to dream world domination,
pacing alone the edges of Elba exile.
Let others travel the globe, stitching
skyline to skyline in an endless horizon.
Plant me instead in some rocky plot
with pad and pencil, turned from the coast
to sketch the contours of coral coloured hills,
sharp angled, bleached stone peasant huts,
blurred lines of windblown olive groves,
and when the scene is etched upon my brain
I'll gaze down at the ground beneath my feet
content to marvel at the moment of an ant,
upon a stone within a far flung field
on dry land in the Middle Sea of Earth,
blue planet, spinning round a solar orb,
pale fire on a strand of flaming beads,
concentric circles in a glittering galaxy,
gold island in a stellar archipelago,
glass chip in the mosaic of the cosmos,
a mere dust speck, brushed
from the sleeve of God.

John Kohan