

**“This is not a history of great world events – that is in the backdrop – but of what it was really like to live through those times.”**

– Sanjeev Sanyal, author and economist

**“This book [is] special ... for its earnestness, sincerity and refined story telling.”**

– Ravi Velloor, Associate Editor, *The Straits Times*

**“*Lost at 15, Found at 50* takes you racing through time and space ... it will leave you breathless – and asking for more.”**

– Kiran Doshi, author of *Jinnah Often Came to Our House*

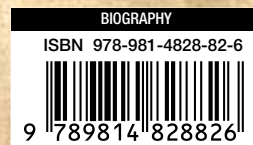
From the Soviet Union’s Iron Curtain to Burma’s Bamboo Curtain and Sikkim to Seoul, this memoir follows the journey of a young girl whose life was a cross-continental rollercoaster ride that soared and plunged from one country to another. By the time she was fifteen, Ashwini Devare had lived in six countries. Her globetrotting life continued when she became a career journalist, and her story culminates in the tropical foliage of Singapore.

With a front row seat to political developments and upheavals around the world, Devare chronicles a lifetime of nomadic living: Moscow at the height of the Cold War, a far-right Switzerland pushing to limit immigration, America mired in the Vietnam War, Sikkim in the midst of a pro-democracy movement that would overthrow the monarchy, India during turbulent times and South Korea, where student demonstrations convulsed the country.

*Lost at 15, Found at 50* is a vibrant reflection by a singular voice on adventure, identity and courage.

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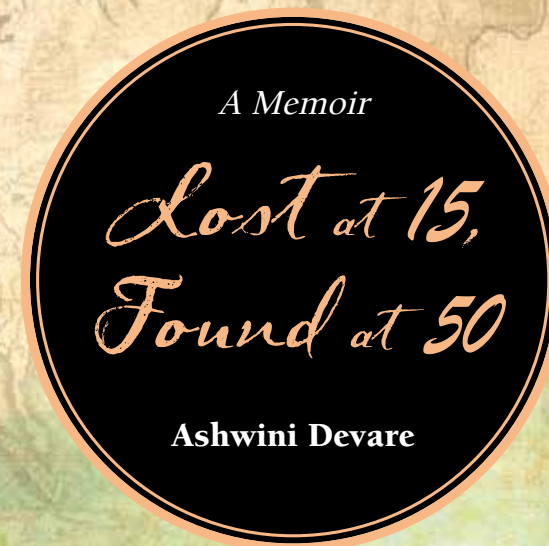
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Ashwini Devare

*Lost at 15, Found at 50*



*Travel, trials & tribulations  
in foreign lands*

## For Review only

“*Lost at 15, Found at 50* has the unique advantage of being based on a life that has seen the author move through a series of exciting opportunities for travel and work and the reader is given a front seat in a ride that is as enriching as it is illuminating.”

– Professor Rajeev S. Patke,  
Yale-NUS College, Singapore

“Combining her life-time experiences, journalistic skills and talent for story-telling, Ashwini has brought forth a wonderful book. It should appeal to readers of all ages.”

– K. Kesavapany, Governor, Singapore International Foundation

“*Lost at 15, Found at 50* is a rollercoaster of a memoir that takes you racing through time and space, starting with India still in its teens, to an icy, post-Khrushchev Moscow, to a Washington under siege, to a Sikkim in turmoil, to Burma, to South Korea. Don't miss the ride. It will leave you breathless – and asking for more.”

– Kiran Doshi, author of *Jinnah Often Came to Our House*

“Ashwini is a talented story-teller and this book is a wonderful, gripping book, that everyone, especially women, should read. It's a travelogue, a lesson in history and a life manual all in one. I highly recommend this book.”

– Ira Trivedi, author and yoga master

“A personal testimony of wandering through the lanes and bylanes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century history. This is not a history of great world events – that is in the backdrop – but of what it was really like to live through those times.”

– Sanjeev Sanyal, author and economist

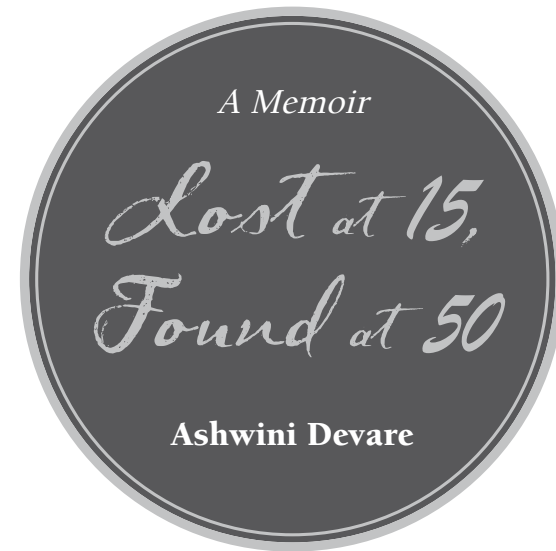
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“Ashwini Devare represents India’s post-midnight generation – born not in the flush of the freedom that arrived on the midnight of August 15, 1947 but within the cohort that appeared between the searing defeat in the China war of 1962 and the massive victory over Pakistan in 1971 that stamped New Delhi’s dominance over the sub-continent. Daughter of a distinguished Indian Foreign Service officer, Ashwini Devare has written a memoir that also tells her father’s story: the Indian external relations journey starting with the nervously uneasy proximity with the Soviet Union, the instinctively warm but ideologically distant United States, hegemonic behaviour in Sikkim and the easy moorings India found in Singapore as the springboard of the contemporaneous Look East/Act East policy.”

– Ravi Velloor, Associate Editor and Asia columnist,  
*The Straits Times*

“A fresh and lively narrative, suffused with the authenticity of a bright-eyed child growing into adulthood from her front-row seat to world-changing international events. Ashwini Devare’s memoir makes you homesick for places you’ve never set foot, all the while giving you a glance into the often not-so-glamorous life of an Indian diplomat and his family. More than anything, the book demonstrates how seemingly distant political incidents shape the lives of individuals, both natives and those who are temporary guests in a foreign land.”

– Anne Ostby, author of *Pieces of Happiness*



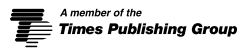
***Travel, trials & tribulations  
in foreign lands***

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*For Mom, Dad and Aparna*

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In this memoir, names, places and experiences are based on the author's memories, conversations and recollections. Some of the dialogues, names and scenes have been changed or recreated to protect individual privacy. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

For Review only



## *Contents*

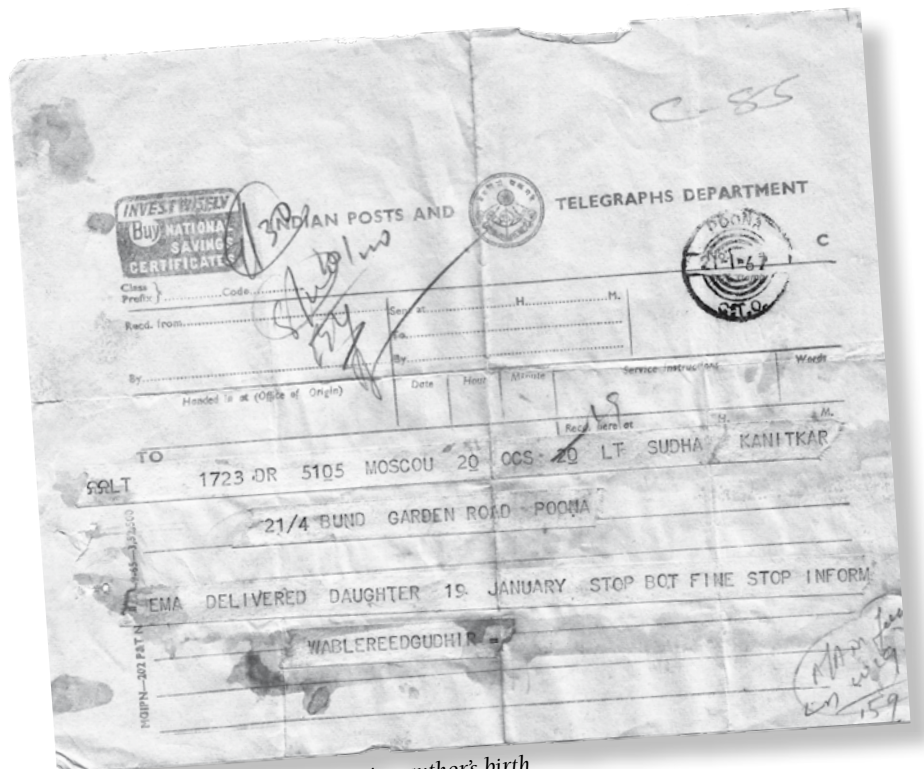
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<b>Behind the Iron Curtain</b> Russia 1965–1967	<b>9</b>
<b>The Other Side of the Cold War</b> USA 1967–1970	<b>37</b>
<b>Kingdom of Hope</b> Sikkim 1970–1974	<b>61</b>
<b>Brown Girl in the Ring</b> Switzerland 1976–1979	<b>83</b>
<b>Behind the Bamboo Curtain</b> Burma 1979–1981	<b>113</b>
<b>Feels Like Home</b> India 1981–1985	<b>131</b>
<b>The Land of the Morning Calm</b> South Korea 1986–1989	<b>151</b>
<b>Guns and Graffiti</b> USA 1990s	<b>185</b>
<b>Island in the Rain</b> Singapore 2000s	<b>221</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>255</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>256</b>

For Review only

*Behind the Iron Curtain*

RUSSIA  
1965-1967



Telegram from Moscow announcing author's birth

## **Moscow**

A slender young woman stood at the hospital window, straining her eyes through the sleet that buffeted the street six floors below. My mother clutched me tightly in her arms, her child-like face pinched with fatigue and anxiety, eager eyes searching the sidewalk corner where she knew her husband would be waiting to catch a glimpse of his young wife and newborn.

Snow fell steadily, casting a silver metallic over the darkening afternoon. Suddenly my mother spotted him in a swirl of snowflakes, huddled in a coat, scarf and a hat, bracing one of the bitterest January days of the year. She waved wildly, her face brightening the minute his outline emerged through the snow.

“Look, there’s Daddy!” She lifted me higher in the hope that he could see us: two blurry little dots outlined against a frosted steel window. Her eyes filled with tears, worrying about her husband shivering in his coat. He stood there, waving at us for a long while till the darkness swallowed him from sight.

My life began here, in the heart of Moscow, in a hospital for foreigners, near the grand Kropotkinskaya Station. There was nothing grand about the hospital though; it was stark and spartan, as were most institutions in communist Russia in those days. The austere maternity ward my mother and I were in was devoid of any toys or colours heralding the presence of a newborn; instead it had grey curtains and sheets, metal beds, steel trays and windows with grills. The week I was born coincided with a flu outbreak

in the city and to seal off all infections, the hospital authorities immediately slapped draconian quarantine measures across all wards, forbidding visitors – even family members – from seeing patients. As a result of this sweeping ban, I did not get to see my father for the first fortnight of my life, except for those rare snatches of him standing on the roadside from our perch high above.

My birth created quite a stir at the hospital; it was the first time Russian nurses had seen a brown-skinned baby with dark hair. In fact, ‘the girl with black hair’ became a talking point in our ward and nurses from different departments came to peer at me and marvel at my jet-black halo of curls.

Just twenty years old, my mother was lonely and homesick, and welcomed the diversion. It helped her get through the long dreary days of being the lone Indian in the hospital, the agony of mastitis, and the postpartum depression that was washing over her in big giant waves.

“No, please, I cannot eat this,” she shook her head at the plate of food the nurse had wheeled into the hospital room. She shut her eyes tightly to hide angry tears; this was the third day in a row she was being offered boiled potatoes and cabbage. Earlier, the nurse had brought in a juicy chicken drumstick which my mother refused, being a strict vegetarian. Fresh vegetables and fruits were in short supply in the streets of communist Moscow and, in any case, no one seemed to comprehend her desperate requests in broken Russian that she was a pure vegetarian, who did not even eat egg. As each day passed, my mother started becoming weaker. The pain of mastitis became unbearable and she stopped producing milk. It was only when a senior nurse noticed the untouched food trays leaving my mother’s room that there was a sudden bustle of activity in our ward and senior

# For Review only

staff were notified. The management then reluctantly agreed to my father's request to send in home-cooked food. From then onwards, every day, a 'tiffin' would arrive at the maternity ward, concealing within it the aromas of curry, vegetable and *chapati*, all of which deliciously boosted my mother's spirits for the rest of our hospital stay.

I loved Russian milk, which I drank in copious quantities the first year of my life. My father would go to one of the several 'milk kitchens' located near our house and buy small bottles of milk and yogurt, a common source of dairy for children in Moscow back then. My parents often joke about how the Russian milk made me bonny and strong, giving me good immunity in those early months.

"You never got sick," my mother told me. "It was definitely the Russian milk!"



"Ten days after your father and I tied the knot, we were off," my mother recalled. "The journey to Moscow was like the voyage of Sinbad, full of adventure. It was like going on a treasure hunt."

It was a story my sister and I would often curl up on the sofa to listen: my parents' foreign odyssey just a month after their marriage, which catapulted them from the confines of their small town Pune in India into the heart of communist Russia.

Defying all the predictions of the family astrologer that she would become a teacher, my mother had rushed to the altar instead, marrying a complete stranger who would whisk her off to the unknown. This stranger was Ravi, a thin, gawky Indian Foreign Service probationer, who had never stepped outside his home state of Maharashtra until he cleared the prestigious all-

India Civil Services Examination, which landed him in the capital, Delhi. A year later, Ravi's life would change dramatically when a senior bureaucrat in the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) informed him that his maiden posting had been confirmed. "Young man, you have a month to get going," the officer told him sternly. "To Moscow."

Growing up, my father had always dreamed of faraway, distant lands, despite his small-town upbringing. The oldest of three children, he grew up on the campus of Pune's Wadia College where my grandfather was a professor. Wadia College was an institution that even back then attracted foreign students from countries as far away as the Middle East and Africa. Their house became a convening ground for intellectuals, students, writers and poets. These early influences would ultimately shape my father's curiosity about the bigger world that lay beyond the fringes of his hometown.

The year my father turned fourteen, my grandfather died unexpectedly, devastating his wife and three young children. In a single brutal blow, they were rendered penniless and homeless. They were forced to vacate their modest but comfortable accommodation on campus. Over the years my grandparents had nurtured deep friendships, and people whom they had helped along the way now stepped in, opening their homes to the shattered widow and her children. A trickle of money from the sales of my grandfather's academic books allowed the family to scrape through the next few years. My father and his sister put their heart and soul into their studies, sensing but not fully processing that education might be the only route for advancing their destinies.

My father applied to the school of engineering because that was what everyone around him did, but he realised very quickly



# For Review only

it wasn't for him. His passion for political science kept bubbling, till it burst forth with a force that he could no longer ignore. My father had first heard about the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) through a friend. The civil services seemed like a nebula – floating mysteriously in a distant galaxy, out of reach for most ordinary middle-class Indians, many of whom had never heard of the IFS. My father was intrigued. He started to prepare for the Civil Services Examination with feverish gusto, studying engineering by day and political theory by night. The highly selective exam, once cleared, would open doors to the civil services, allowing candidates to choose their preference for the IFS, IAS (Indian Administrative Service) and other central services.

It could not have been an easy decision for my father; he was, after all, the oldest son. His sister was of marriageable age and his mother fretted about finding her a good family, a prospect that was daunting for a widow with meagre financial means. His brother, the youngest, was only ten and his future lay ahead, uncharted and uncertain. That he would be abandoning his family to vanish into the unknown, weighed heavily on my father's shoulders. With her characteristic pragmatism, his mother came to his rescue. She did not allow her own doubts to cloud what she predicted was a bigger, brighter canvas for her son. Hence, when it was time for my father to make his selection, he was able to choose the IFS freely, with full blessings from his mother.

The whirlwind began – beginning with boot camp at the Mussoorie Academy, a mandatory training requirement for all probationers in the civil services where they learned everything from horse riding to foreign languages. The choice of foreign language was decided by the MEA in Delhi and in my father's case, he was assigned Russian.

But there was a rather important matter that needed to be taken care of first. Just before he set off to Mussoorie, my father had experienced the first flutter of love. The subject of his fixation was a pretty young woman from the city of Nagpur, whose name had been suggested as an ideal match for my father by a common friend of both families. My paternal grandmother, eager to see her son married off before he left the shores of India, welcomed the solicitation enthusiastically.

Even though their marriage was 'arranged', my mother had already decided this was the man she wanted to marry. She had seen a black and white photograph of my father in a local newspaper that had published the list of IAS/IFS exam toppers – and immediately fallen in love. She saved the photograph and would look at it wistfully ever so often. The young man was not conventionally handsome, his face was thin and rather gaunt. His chin was a bit too pronounced and his demeanour, serious. But underneath that reserve, my mother sensed a man who was sensitive and good-natured. She was drawn to his eyes that looked gentle and kind.

As was customary in an arranged marriage, my father with half his family in tow arrived at my mother's house to 'see the bride'. In accordance with protocol, my mother had to serve all of them tea. She would tell us later how she hated going around with a tray, angry that my father had shown up with his entire family! Was he going to make a decision based on what *they* said? Did he not have a mind of his own? Yet, she couldn't be angry with my father for too long. Despite the presence of elders in the room, my parents had eyes only for each other and they knew instantly they would be soulmates.

The wedding was a hastened affair – a simple ceremony held

# For Review only

ten days prior to their departure to Moscow. For the couple that had to juggle two milestones simultaneously – marriage and a foreign posting – it was a frenzied fortnight of shopping for winter clothes, packing and goodbyes.

The day dawned for Ravi and my mother, Alka, to leave. Dozens of family members, some of whom had travelled overnight by bus, thronged the departure lounge at Bombay's Santa Cruz Airport. They came armed with food, flowers and affection, wanting to offer their blessings to the newlyweds. The couple stood amidst them, dazed, the blitzkrieg of the last few weeks clearly showing on their pale faces. My mother's side of the family were perplexed at the speed with which Alka had gone from chasing academic dreams to marrying a man who was taking her off to some faraway land. They eyed him suspiciously; a distant uncle openly wondered whether Ravi was a communist.

"My aunt Meena, she pressed my hands with so much love, she was not sure she would see me ever again," recalled my mother. "All my relatives had that look on their faces as if they thought this would be the last time they would see me."

Flying was a novelty in those days and the fact that someone in the family was headed off to a 'phoren' land, and on an airplane at that, was in itself a wondrous event that created quite a stir among relatives from both sides, many of whom had only heard of Moscow because of Raj Kapoor, the Indian mega star who brought Russia to the Indian public through his famous Bollywood blockbuster hit of the fifties, *Awaara*.

"What a commotion there was at the airport!" said my father.

"People came with bouquets and garlands, I felt like some sort of a politician," said my mother.

"We were carrying enormous amounts of luggage," said my

father. "We'd been told nothing was available in Moscow, so everyone brought all kinds of things for us to take along. And of course, your mother was carrying her famous *tanpura*." This stringed instrument that accompanied my mother's singing would journey with her throughout my father's postings.

"And all those woollen clothes," said my mother laughing. "I could only think of pictures of Eskimos and igloos from our geography books. We just grabbed whatever happened to be woollen – gloves, monkey caps, socks, scarves, underwear. We were haunted by tales of the Siberian winter, which we had heard caused exposed body parts like ears and noses to drop off! In Pune, our only contact with ice was ice cream. We had absolutely no inkling of the severity of winter in Moscow."

"After all, don't forget it was the Russian winter," said my father. "The famous winter that stopped the victorious advances of both Napoleon and Hitler."

In addition to their own luggage Ravi and Alka were carrying an assortment of items for the embassy staff in Moscow. "People had asked for things like toothpaste, *masalas*, even bananas and fresh coriander! They would wait longingly for someone to come from India, they were so deprived of consumer goods."

"We looked a real sight at the airport, your father and I. We were wearing our winter coats in the Bombay heat because we had no space in our luggage to put them! We stuffed full every pocket of our jackets and overcoats. We had handbags and *thaylas* (Indian cloth bags) on each shoulder, bursting at the seams with all sorts of things, and then we had these big garlands on top of the coats, from our loving relatives. I could barely be seen through all that!"

As their plane took off, my parents were acutely conscious that Air India represented the only link between their motherland

# For Review only

and a country that would become their new home. Because of the 1965 India-Pakistan war, flying over Pakistan was prohibited and as their aircraft detoured Iran, daylight dissolved into night, bringing them closer to the vast continent-like country of Russia. From the protected familiarity of their provincial lives, Ravi and Alka were suddenly catapulted into an utterly unknown world of foreign diplomacy that would become the vehicle for their globe-sprinting life across peregrine lands for the next forty years.

It was a pitch-black night. When the Air India flight began its descent, the blinking lights of Moscow appeared through the portholes and the drone of engines merged with the strains of sitar played in the aircraft PA system. As soon as my parents stepped out of the aircraft, soft flurries of snow landed on their cheeks and the young couple found themselves shivering in their grossly inadequate winter coats that had felt so snug and warm in Mumbai, but now suddenly felt like plastic.

“The whole area surrounding us at the tarmac was blanketed with snow, for a moment I thought I was in fairyland,” said my mother.

With the raucous din of Mumbai still drumming in her ears, and the tears barely dry on her cheeks, she walked into the deserted silence at Sheremetyevo Moscow International Airport with a flutter of fear, and homesickness. India seemed light years away: the fading faces of her parents, bravely trying not to break down when she turned to wave at them one last time, her own face awash with tears as she walked out of the doors onto the tarmac, a light Bombay breeze gently swishing her hair, reassuring, whispering farewell.

Staring at the white people around her, my mother was uneasily reminded of the long distance from home. She turned to

look at the man by her side who looked equally bewildered, but was fighting hard to maintain composure in front of his new wife.

They looked around for someone familiar and soon spotted the officer who was there to receive them. Ranjit Sharma rushed towards them, smiling and waving. Sharma was an old friend; my father and he had got to know each other well at the academy in Mussoorie. My mother felt instantly comforted to see a fellow Indian. Sharma was gregarious and warm, his enthusiasm the best antidote to their disorientation. He was delighted to have his old friend join him in Moscow and couldn't stop beaming.

“Welcome to Moscow, Ravi and Alka!” Sharma grinned, thumping my father vigorously on the back. Looking at their baggage spread out all around, he laughed, “*Arrey, yaar*, you've got the whole of India with you! I can't wait for my goodies!” Sharma suddenly spotted the *tanpura*. “I didn't realise we have a singer in our midst, wonderful, wonderful.” And he slung the *tanpura* on his shoulder and rushed them through immigration. Brushing off their pleas of exhaustion, Sharma drove them straight to a party being hosted by an accountant friend of his, not even allowing them time to change first.

“We went with him in our bedraggled, dishevelled state,” said my mother. “Someone at the party asked me whether I had any utensils and if I'd like to borrow some, and I had no idea what a utensil meant! I felt so out of place, so small-town, my clothes, accent, everything felt so inadequate. I was *so* embarrassed.”

Ravi and Alka's initiation into the Foreign Service had officially begun.



# For Review only

The very next evening my parents were invited to dinner at the Indian Ambassador's residence. He was hosting a special meal to welcome the three new probationers, including my father.

"Do I have to go?" asked my mother in a meek voice. Shy and timid, the thought of dining with the Ambassador was a daunting prospect.

"We can't say no to the big boss, he's having the dinner to welcome us to the mission," said Ravi. "Don't worry, Sharma will be there. It's just him, Mehra and us." My mother knew of Mehra, the other probationer who worked in the embassy, but had yet to meet him.

The Indian Ambassador was a highly respected diplomat with powerful ties to the New Delhi political elite, handpicked by the Prime Minister's Office for Moscow, which was seen as a prized posting. New Delhi's top brass wanted a man in Moscow whom they could trust implicitly to secure India's interests with the Soviets. The Ambassador not only understood the Russians, he also knew the Americans well, having been posted to Washington prior to coming to Moscow. The Ambassador welcomed the couple warmly. Sharma and Mehra arrived at the same time, looking equally nervous. My father was the only married probationer among them, which seemed to accord him a slightly senior status among the bachelors.

"Please come in," said the Ambassador in his deep baritone, as he ushered them through the foyer into the living room, which looked imposing to the junior officers.

"I hope you are comfortable in your flats?" the Ambassador inquired courteously.

"Yes, Sir," answered all three in chorus.

The Ambassador looked at my mother. "Welcome to Moscow, young lady."

"Thank you," Alka stuttered, feeling acutely self-conscious.

The Ambassador felt a strong sense of responsibility towards the newly married couple, technically still on their honeymoon; and with his wife away in India, he was determined to make up for her absence with generous hospitality.

"Please, sit down, sit down."

My father had forgotten all about his wife, so preoccupied was he in making a good first impression on his boss. My mother sat down on the far end of a sofa, and looked around at the tastefully decorated living room, adorned with Indian paintings and objets d'art. A gleaming brass Ganesha figure sat in an alcove; a chandelier cast a luminous glow over the small group sitting awkwardly in front of the Ambassador. My mother shivered; despite the heating in the residence, her sweater and sari felt grossly thin.

"Ravi, I hope you've got your wife a warm coat, otherwise she can borrow my wife's," said the Ambassador.

"Yes, Sir, we have got coats, thank you, Sir," said my father.

"All right, then, what can I offer you gentlemen?"

Sharma asked for whisky, as did Mehra. At first my father hesitated, and then he too said, whisky. The Ambassador turned to my mother. "And what about you my dear girl? What would you like to have?"

My mother was tongue-tied and then, after a few seconds of silence, she blurted out, "Whisky."

There was a stunned silence. My father looked at her astonished. He was about to say something when the Ambassador, with a twinkle in his eye, said, "Have you had whisky before?"

"No," said my mother, mortified to have all eyes boring into her.

# For Review only

Still smiling, the Ambassador said, “Then I suggest you start with a glass of wine.” He handed her a glass of wine, the colour of which seemed to match her flaming cheeks. She stared at the deep red liquid in her glass, and wondered how anything could taste so vile. The jet lag and homesickness were threatening to flood her any minute and she wanted to cry. Later that night when they were home, my father said, “Why did you ask for whisky?”

“Well, you said eating non-vegetarian food is compulsory in the Foreign Service, so I thought maybe drinking whisky is compulsory as well. That’s why I asked for whisky.”

For years afterwards, Sharma and Mehra would tease my mother about her love for hard liquor. It would be a long time before she was able to laugh with them without squirming when recounting her first official dinner at the Ambassador’s.



My parents arrived in Moscow at the height of the Cold War, with Russia firmly entrenched behind the Iron Curtain. Every day was a reminder that this was deep communist territory. After almost a decade of being in power, in 1964, Nikita S Khrushchev was ousted from office by the triumvirate of his party comrades Alexei Kosygin, Leonid Brezhnev and N Podgorny who took over the reins of communist Russia. While Khrushchev had improved the standard of living for Russians and invested in the space programme, his reign was a turbulent one for the Soviet Union. In foreign policy, there had been dangerous developments, including the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 which brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the edge of war. Under the

fresh leadership of the three men, a new dawn was rising over this mammoth country. Brezhnev would go on to sideline his rivals, consolidate power and rule the Soviet Union for the next two decades, building it into the world’s superpower on a head-on collision with the United States.

In the wintry streets of Moscow there was a permanent pall of gloom, which weighed down the city like heavy old upholstery. The sun would rise at 9am, sometimes, never at all. No colour dared pierce the dreary landscape. The long, forbidding stretches of winter wrapped the city in a frigid, sunless grip. Life in the city was defined by constant shortages. Serpentine queues were intrinsic to everyday life in Moscow; from meat, milk and fruit to clothing, everything had to be stocked when it was available because once it disappeared from the shelves, no one could predict when the item would show up again. The exception to the dourness was ice cream, which the Russians simply loved. Rosy-cheeked children eating ice cream was a common sight in the city.

The spectre of the Second World War continued to haunt the Soviet Union, a country that had suffered the maximum loss of lives of nearly 20 million of its people. The regime would deliberately emphasise the sacrifices that had been made by the Russians in the war to evoke patriotic fervour and rationalise the hardships faced by the common people.

Ravi and Alka did not allow this doom to engulf them; instead they drank in their new environment in big gulps, like thirsty children. To them, fresh from India, Moscow felt grand and majestic. For the first few months, they were in a constant state of wide-eyed wonder. Together they discovered the romance of the Russian ballet as they watched *Swan Lake* at the Bolshoi

# For Review only

Theatre and soaked in the magic of the Russian Philharmonic Orchestra. They immersed themselves in *Voyna i Mir* (Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), a movie that had just been released in Russia. The melancholy of communist life could not crush Russia's long legacy of cultural richness in the arts, which bubbled softly under the veneer of austerity that marked day-to-day life in the city.

"I can never forget the first time I saw *Swan Lake*," said my mother. "When the orchestra began and the dancers came on stage, I couldn't tell if they were humans or swans, that's how graceful they were."

My father took a loan and bought a small Russian car, a bright red Moskvich. But there was one problem: he didn't know how to drive. Captain Kapoor, a senior defence officer at the embassy felt sorry for him and agreed to give him a few lessons. Every evening, for the next few weeks, Captain Kapoor would make my father practise up and down the embassy driveway till one evening he declared him fit to take his Moskvich on to the streets of Moscow. After that, there was no stopping my father, who would take his wife on long drives around the city. Together, they marvelled at the wide boulevards, the tree-lined avenues, the magnificent buildings and bridges arching the sky. They cruised along the Moskva River, through posh Arbat and Kalinin Prospekt, admiring the famous Hotel Ukraina, its Gothic spires illuminating the winter sky. They would drive up to the forested Lenin Hills and gaze down at the city below.

One area the communists had full mastery over was infrastructure. "Look," my father would point out to my mother. "They have special lanes for trams and trolley buses. And look at how wide the footpaths are." The subway that went deep into the bowels of the earth fascinated both of them. Many were ornate

underground palaces, with chandeliers, marble statues and stained-glass murals, symbols of grandeur from the past. They observed how vestiges from Stalin's era were still stamped across much of the cityscape.

My parents enrolled in waltzing lessons. Once a week they would go for classes at Gorky Park, where they had a rare chance to interact with local Russians.

"We had to keep changing partners during the lesson," my mother recalled with a smile. "And every time a Russian girl would dance with Ravi, I'd get so jealous."

"She would sulk for days," chuckled my father, who had clearly enjoyed his lessons very much.

"Don't exaggerate. But yes, maybe for a few hours," acknowledged my mother, "that's because you never seemed to be in a hurry to go back home!"



Ravi and Alka's honeymoon period was short-lived. A year and a half later, I was born, on a cold blustery day in January when the chill dropped to minus thirty degrees Celsius and a wind blew across the frozen landscape. Snow had been falling for several days, leaving the city submerged in a deep freeze.

My mother had decided that if she were to have a girl, her daughter would have a Russian name. So she began to call me Irena. But when my grandmother, who continued to wield considerable influence even long-distance, was informed of my name, she was *not* pleased. Her grandchild, she declared, must be named after the first star in the Indian *nakshatra* (constellation) and Ashwini I became.

# For Review only

The days stretched out long and empty for my mother. Cooped up indoors with a fussy newborn became a punishing lesson in motherhood. From washing stashes of cloth diapers by hand and hanging them on the heater to dry, to looking for fresh ingredients for the baby's food and feeding and bathing the baby, to cooking for herself and her husband and cleaning up, days and nights became a blur of sleepless exhaustion. As days shortened and darkness enveloped their small apartment, she became terribly homesick. Visiting the local department stores left her feeling cheated because whenever she walked into the shop, the rows of empty shelves would be invariably devoid of toys, baby clothes, diapers and food.

It was my mother's innate positivity that allowed her to ward off potential depression in Moscow, a condition that was afflicting many, including some embassy officers' wives. They remained indoors, afraid of the cold, and became increasingly miserable. One of them would end her life in the months to follow, jumping off a high floor of an apartment building. Her suicide rattled the Indian community for months, especially my mother who had met the lady on numerous occasions at official functions.

My mother found that the best remedy for self-pity was to get outdoors. As soon as she saw the sun – on that rare occasion when it feebly peeked out – she would quickly bundle me in my pram and we'd head out to the small park near our house in Kutuzovskiy Prospekt. She was like a child excited by the newness of her surroundings; she wanted to share this new world with me. I became her constant companion, who adored her and wanted nothing but to see her dimpled smiling face above me, as she navigated my pram through the streets of our foreign home.

Sometimes she would take me to the Indian embassy. The

minute she walked into the foyer, she would forget the world outside. The tricolour fluttering in the foreground, officers chatting, children of staff members running about and the warmth of being in her comfort zone had no parallel; it was pure, unalloyed joy. All regional differences fell to the side, all Indian languages sounded comfortingly homely and everyone was united in one big bundle of solidarity.

"I was friendly with a Punjabi lady, I felt so close to her," said my mother. "Growing up in Pune, I'd never met a Punjabi before, and she too had never known a Maharashtrian. But we became best friends."

Fridays were especially busy at the embassy, when the weekly Air India flight would arrive with fresh vegetables and fruit, which would then be distributed among the staff.

"We would all gather to collect our vegetables, it was so exciting!" recalled my mother. "One of the officers would distribute the okras, the eggplant, spinach, pumpkin, coriander, while they were still fresh. I can still remember vividly how thrilled I was to make *palak paneer*."

The Embassy of India located in the heart of the city in Ulitsa Obukha was the nerve centre, playing a focal role in enhancing Indo-Soviet relations. Buzzing with delegations, official functions and parties, the embassy rarely had a lull. The imposing grey stone building, dating back to the eighteenth century, had once belonged to a Russian nobleman, which might explain its aristocratic flair. An outhouse in the embassy compound had a history that staffers would proudly narrate to visitors. During his victorious visit to Moscow, Napoleon had shown up at the main entrance of the embassy and tried to open the front door. When he couldn't, he ended up spending the

# For Review only

night in the outhouse, which subsequently came to be known as Napoleon's Dacha.

Life in Moscow was like living in a giant aquarium with nowhere to hide. The Russian government scrupulously monitored the activities of all foreigners, including the diplomatic corps in Moscow. All foreigners, irrespective of their nationality, were seen as potential spies. My parents would tell us how they suspected that all our phones were tapped and rooms bugged, especially bedrooms! The dreaded four-letter word was the UPDK, the *Upravlenie Diplomatichaya Korpusa*, the government body which Lenin had started back in the 1920s to 'assist' foreigners. In reality, 'assistance' was a euphemism for surveillance because no one could keep out of the UPDK's octopus grip. That the KGB leaned heavily on the UPDK for information about foreign embassies in Moscow was well established.

"For every small thing we had to go through UPDK, that was the protocol," said my father. "Even the most basic administrative jobs had to be channelled through them. From fixing toilets to hiring maids, even if there was a cockroach in our apartment, I would have to inform the UPDK – a formal request had to be issued asking them to arrange pest control."

"You couldn't go beyond forty kilometres from your home without permission," said my mother with a shudder. "Many areas were completely off-limits. All embassy personnel were given coupons to buy petrol and even the appointment of a Russian language tutor was arranged by the all-powerful UPDK. It was like having asthma, our chests felt suffocated. We were scared to breathe, sometimes."



For my father, a junior officer, a first assignment to the Soviet Union was politically exhilarating. First as a probationer, then as the Third Secretary, he was at the bottom of the pecking order, with several bosses piled on top of him. He found himself sprinting up steep learning curves. There was so much to learn from his seniors, the whole wide world of diplomacy lay in front of him, a labyrinth he had to lose himself in first, before he could find his way out of it.

Indo-Soviet relations were on an upswing, a honeymoon period, and a good time for Indians to be in Moscow. Indians enjoyed a special relationship with the Soviets, a friendship that coincided with the start of the Cold War, when both superpowers began aggressively wooing former colonies to recruit them into their 'camp'. The Americans chose Pakistan, which they saw as a bulwark against communism, strategic to their defence interests, and began to funnel military and economic aid to it.

Wary of Pakistan, nervous of China, and determined to protect its own interests, India turned to the Soviet Union in its effort to modernise and industrialise, even while the tenet of non-alignment championed by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru remained at the core of its foreign policy. A crushing defeat at the hands of the Chinese in the Sino-Indian war in 1962 further cemented India's tilt towards Russia. A willing and eager Russia soon became India's largest supplier of weapons and technology.

Yet, despite the flowering of ties between India and the Soviet Union, Indian diplomats knew they could not take this relationship for granted. The inscrutable demeanour of the Russians kept everyone in the embassy on edge.





# For Review only

The 1965 India-Pakistan war was a gruelling battle that spanned three weeks and ended with the Indian Army capturing the strategic Haji Pir Pass in Jammu and Kashmir that had been under Pakistani occupation. Wresting control of the Haji Pir Pass, located at an altitude of 2637m in the western Himalayas, was a major military triumph for the Indian Army which just two and a half years earlier had suffered a humiliating loss against Chinese troops. Russia, which had been following the war with keen interest, was broadly supportive of India in the conflict. It suddenly saw this war as a prized opportunity to play umpire. Providing a forum for peace talks would make the Russians look good, and give Premier Kosygin legitimacy on an international platform. With the United States bogged down in the Vietnam War, the Russians took the lead in post-war deliberations, inviting Pakistan President Ayub Khan and India's Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri to Tashkent for negotiations. That was how the political and diplomatic denouement of the war landed at the doorstep of the Indian embassy in Moscow.

With the talks set to begin in just under nine days, the Ambassador was cutting his officers no slack. The embassy became a feverish zone of activity; it was a heart-pumping fortnight for the senior officers, as they fired on all cylinders, working day and night in preparation for Tashkent.

Sharma and my father, both probationers, could only observe the goings-on from a distance. They longed to be part of the historic event, but were busy with mundane jobs reserved for rookie officers. The First Secretary felt sorry for them and assigned them some protocol duties. Sharma and my father were thus able to experience the thrill of playing a tiny role in a big operation.

One brutally cold night, they huddled in their over-heated

office. The wind howled, rattling the large heritage windows of the chancery building. It was close to midnight. Sipping cups of tea, both looked harried and exhausted, aware that the other embassy staff and their boss were not going home anytime soon.

Sharma began flipping through a dossier marked 'Tashkent Logistics', in bold red letters. "Two planeloads of VVIPs flying to Tashkent from India. One's taking PM Shastri, Foreign Minister and Defence Minister. The other one has Army General and Deputy Chief of Army."

"What about Foreign Secretary?" asked my father.

"Arriving Moscow in three days. Better get your best suit out my friend."

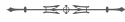
Both Sharma and my father knew fully well that their career prospects, where they would be posted to next, were closely linked to the successful conclusion of this visit. There was a tacit understanding that pleasing all the top brass from Delhi, including Big Boss Foreign Secretary and Immediate Boss Ambassador was of utmost urgency; any diplomatic faux pas would mean getting banished to the very back of beyond.

My father leaned back in his chair and looked at the snow quietly mounting on the sidewalk. "I really hope things go smoothly at Tashkent," he said.

Sharma nodded. They both fell silent. "Yaar, Ravi, it's such a watershed moment," said Sharma. "We're lucky to be here witnessing history."

Sharma and my father lost track of time as they pored over files till they had memorised every minute of the schedule at Tashkent. The night deepened, enveloping the embassy in a dark embrace. Snow continued to fall steadily.

# For Review only



History would twist a victorious triumph for India into a cruel blow for its leadership. At Tashkent, Prime Minister Shastri conceded to withdraw the Indian forces and return the captured posts of Haji Pir Pass and Tithwa, in return for Pakistan's assurance that it would not resort to the use of force against India in the future. What the Indian Army had feared most unravelled at the negotiating table in the dacha.

The same night after the signing of the peace accord, Prime Minister Shastri held a press conference in which he shared the minutes of the negotiations. The decision to cede Haji Pir and Tithwa stirred up a chorus of displeasure back home, with many accusing the Prime Minister of being too 'soft' on Pakistan. Late that night, India's greatly admired and respected Prime Minister collapsed in his dacha. He reportedly had a massive heart attack even before his personal doctor could reach his room. A man who had shown magnanimity and courage in victory would breathe his last in a foreign country, far from the shores of his beloved India, taking the answers of his final moments with him.

Tashkent became the focus of the world's attention as news of Prime Minister Shastri's sudden death spread like wildfire. The Indian embassy went into shock, with everyone walking around in a daze, stunned by the horrific turn of events. Whether the Prime Minister collapsed of a heart attack or was poisoned, his death is shrouded in mystery and remains one of the least investigated high-profile deaths in recent Indian history.

For Sharma and my father, on their maiden postings, Tashkent was a seminal moment in their understanding of Cold

War geopolitics. They witnessed first-hand the ruthless race for supremacy between superpowers, and that countries, especially poor nations like India, were mere pawns in this tussle. Following Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri's shocking death, India's Congress Party elected Indira Gandhi as the new Prime Minister. Under her leadership, the bonhomie with the Russians would continue for the next three decades.



The first three letters of the English alphabet held deep significance to our lives in the Foreign Service, as they determined which country we would head to next. As we hit the two-year mark in Moscow, the uncertainty of '*Where next*' hovered on our horizon. Would it be an 'A' posting or 'B'? What if it was 'C'?

"They can't be that nasty to us," my mother would say to my father, "to send us to a 'C' place after Moscow. Ambassador likes us, he knows you've worked so hard, he will surely put in a good word for us at the Ministry. They know we have a small baby." And so it went on, the anxiety, the nervousness, the tossing and the turning. When postings of other colleagues were announced, there would be much anticipation as my parents tried to fit the pieces of the puzzle.

"Shah is leaving Rome soon," said my father. "Mani is hoping to go there. Teheran is also coming up in three months."

"Oh no," my mother said, her face becoming small. "Please not Teheran."

A week later there was a flurry of excitement in the embassy. My father had been summoned to the Ambassador's chamber

# For Review only

and was inside for a good long while. Later that afternoon, my father bounded up the steps to our apartment.

“I have some news,” he told my mother, feigning calm, as he removed his coat and scarf, frisking off the bits of snow that clung to him.

“Please don’t bring the snow in,” admonished my mother. Then, noting his expression, she immediately sensed something was up. “What’s happened? Has Delhi...”

“Ambassador called me into his office. He congratulated me. Delhi is sending us to Washington!”

“Oh my gosh!” My mother didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. She crumpled onto the sofa and scooped me in her arms. “I’m so happy! All your hard work was recognised by MEA. Thank God!”

So now we were headed to the *other side* of the Cold War. A land we had heard was so free, even the air there smelt free.

Even though freedom beckoned, we were sad to say goodbye to Moscow, our very first home. This was where my mother had plunged into foreign waters and learned to swim. She had given birth to me, a permanent reminder of their very first stop on the Foreign Express. They had bequeathed me the one word in my passport – Russia – that would always provoke a raised eyebrow by an immigration officer and curiosity among friends, for the rest of my life.

For my father, Russia was the maiden launch into a career that would span forty years. Now, he was heading to the other superpower where he would represent the interests of his country, and play a part in cementing and building relations between India and the United States.

With me wrapped tightly in my mother’s arms, my parents

boarded the plane that would take us to the continent of the free. My mother trembled, both from the cold and the excitement, her slim frame heavy with the prospect of starting all over again, in a brand new land.

We turned to wave to our friends who had gathered to say goodbye, the embassy family that had become such an intimate part of our lives.

We didn’t know when we would ever see them again.

## About the Author

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Ashwini Devare is a journalist and author. She has worked for BBC's Asia Business Report and CNBC Asia. Her first book *Batik Rain* (2014) received critical acclaim and was longlisted for the Frank O'Connor Short Story Award. She has a Master's degree in Broadcast Journalism from the American University in Washington, DC. Ashwini lives in Singapore with her husband and two sons.