

A Literary Double

CIA?

KGB?

By Herbert Gold

WHO is this smiling Soviet international traveler, Victor Louis, who seems to be in charge, among so many other responsibilities, of transporting forged and dubious literary documents, embarrassing photographs, curious variations of repressed texts by famous writers, advance copies suspected of being arranged by the C.I.A. or the K.G.B. (or both, according to some would-be paranoids), and in one case at least, even played nurse and companion to a shrill novelist, Valeri Tarsis, whom the Soviet government judged crazy enough to be harmless and therefore fit to be deposited in the eager hands of English and American literati?

Most recently, Victor — Victor E. Louis, according to his card; Vitali Lui, according to other sources — arranged the international sale of those confused notes called the Khrushchev memoirs. He seems to make contact with a large number of the literary and journalistic visitors to Moscow and keeps so busy all over the world that it sometimes seems there must be many Victor Louises, all smiley and nervous and rich and giggly and eager and knowing, stamped out on an assembly line somewhere in Saltminegorsk.

★ ★ ★

I WAS told to meet the cordial fellow in Moscow four years ago — because he was so juicy and fun-loving and good contacts and helpful and everybody knows old Victor. If you're a writer, you really don't have to look him up; somehow he finds you. "He knows everything. He can help," my friend said. Other people told me to look up different experts, but many of them were hard to find, afraid, unwilling to meet another foreigner, abstracted by fear or rules; if they made appointments with me, it was on the steps of the Godless Museum or in the park.



Victor Louis, a Russian who is "all smiley and nervous and rich and giggly and eager and knowing."

21 FEB 71

Agent?

Not Victor. Not our man Victor Louis. He practically hopped into my arms with squeaks of delight. He was my true pal. We walked through hotel lobbies, into limousines and to happy celebrations at his house, for all the world like the official greeter for, say, the city of La Jolla, paying attention to the P.R. man from The Senior Citizens Review.

"Come to dinner," he said. "Come meet some people. What you doing tonight? Hey, come on."

★ ★ ★

BUT despite his general duties as an all-purpose literary greeter, Victor's international ham-and-eggs business now seems focused on one curious traditional Russian activity — the use of literature as a means to create History and continue the Struggle.

Herbert Gold, the San Francisco novelist, has written "The Magic Will," a book of stories and essays, which will be published this spring.

Victor Louis broke the story of Khrushchev's ouster, tipping off favored Western correspondents in advance of any public convulsion — that was hard news. He published a report of an interview with the Nobel Prize winner, Solzhenitsyn, which Solzhenitsyn says never took place. That is softer news. And he attempted to undercut the famous Svetlana documents by carrying abroad an "official version," including variant sections of her journals, papers locked in her desk drawers, reports of conversations with her former husbands and even an interview with Svetlana's long-dead aunt.

★ ★ ★

NOW it seems almost as enlightening to inquire why Victor Louis carried the alleged Khrushchev memoirs abroad as it is actually to read these familiar tales told on the playground after school. Were they released to provide a weapon for attack on the liberals in the Kremlin? To support the liberals? To muddy the waters about Stalin once again? Or simply ("How pleasant it is to have money, heigh ho!" — Arthur Hugh Clough, 1891-1961) for the — well, the fortunes paid worldwide for them? Time, Inc., for the American rights alone, must have given Victor a few great moments.

The notion that Victor Louis is one of the last of the oldtime operators gains good support from the facts. He translated "My Fair Lady" into Russian and collects its royalties. He imports American movies. He writes travel articles for the international press, and even has a contract with The London Evening News, not one of the great newspapers, in fact a rather zilchy one, but a useful credential.

Together with this experiment in spiritism, he peddled snapshots the lady found embarrassing. And to make the whole thing more earthy, there were hints of pornographic revelations in the offing. Solzhenitsyn applied the words "dirty trick" to Victor's attempt to get him in trouble with the KGB. The famous daughter used even stronger

language. (Fraud, thievery, blackmail.)

★ ★ ★

HE IS one busy man. With his glasses like Fruit Cola bottles, his plump and pink face, his nervous twitch, he works harder than he should to qualify for the All-Russian Indoor Sitting Suave Contest. Urbanity is one of his hobbies. He tells everyone the story of his imprisonment in an earlier, more difficult time. For what? He implies politics. Others in Moscow suggest that he was a police agent in a Stalin labor camp. He talks freely, but doesn't tell.

When Sinyavsky and Daniel were condemned for sending their writings abroad, after a trial which shamed the Soviet Union even unto the ranks of the superloyal French and Italian Communist parties, Victor is credited with a lovely counterploy. The novelist Tarsis, judged an insane dissenter, committed to a sanitarium, would be shipped to the West as a proof that, look, we're happy to get rid of these malcontents. "See? We don't keep people. They want out? See, he's out." Who rode nanny alongside Tarsis when he arrived in London? Busy Victor Louis, smiling and explaining. You see, he wants to go — good! goodbye!

But Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn are bad boys with their Nobel awards, and Brodsky, Akhmatova, Sinyavsky, Daniel, Aleksandr Ginsburg — ah, so complicated, those are other stories. They are foolish poets and thinkers, unlike middleman Victor, your friendly guide to Moscow.

★ ★ ★

A FEW years ago, in San Francisco, Victor Louis turned up with a tourist's passport, unescorted by the chuck-faced chaperons who usually ride herd on Soviet delegates. He was, in fact, a visitor, not a delegate to anything — a Soviet first! Just a travelin' man. He had been passed from an N.B.C. executive in New York to a local business executive to a bachelor lawyer, who found himself in charge of providing the charming Russian with provincial entertainment. Victor was writing a guide to Ameri-

ca, it seemed, and for his research he required the following three bundles of experience, and quickly, quickly:

- To enjoy transcultural sexual congress with a Jewish whore on silk sheets.

- To meet some San Francisco gangster, Mafia, Cosa Nostra or racketeer chieftains.

- Information about the American banking system. ("Peculiar books for a guy looking to get laid," said one of his guides. "The History of American Banking.' Stuff like that.")

His activities during his brief sojourn in San Francisco partake of high roguishness, at least. A secretary with whom he consoled himself while awaiting Experience No. 1 says: "He told me he was a double agent, loyal to both sides, and both know he's loyal to both. I know that sounds confusing. He says he's too important to get in trouble." The businessman says Victor put \$65,000 in cash in his safe, and then took it out again before he left. Why? No explanation. (He may have heard that San Francisco is an expensive town for tourists.)

He got his three wishes in San Francisco. The genie was good to him. The American tradition of hospitality is a powerful one.

★ ★ ★

THIS ACTIVITY involves rapid upward mobility for a man who served as messenger boy for the New Zealand and Brazilian Embassies in Moscow just after World War II, then went away to prison for a decade, then appeared in the late fifties as a purveyor of avant-garde paintings to foreigners in Moscow, then merchandised interviews with Khrushchev and Vice President Humphrey, versions of American musicals, photograph albums from Soviet archives. At least it seems like upward mobility to an American. It may, in Soviet terms, be sideways advancement.

A man who is lascivious can't be all bad. A man who exposes himself so dramatically — words, money and temper — is still alive and vigorous amid the multiplying grayness of contemporary Moscow. He walks an exposed and dangerous high tightrope.

If the United States of America must have an adversary to the east, it's reassuring that the adversary is not a monolithic one. Weakness and greed, enthusiasm for goods and toys, a willingness to saw on the limb on which he sits make Victor Louis the kind of adversary we might learn to enjoy.

He is also a homely friend, not merely an enemy. He really likes making contact. He is doing a job with enthusiasm. Amid all the passionate issues which separate us from the Soviet rulers, one of the matters which give hope for a reconciliation is this playful and erratic gaming. We may not understand Victor Louis any better than he himself does, but we can recognize him, smoke his Cuban cigars and use him as we are used by him. Many Americans are in friendly touch with useful Victor.

He is a confused soul with clear allegiances. He is a complicated person serving a rigid cause. Most likely he has new surprises in store for the growing fan club of Victorologists.