

Joan Baez
in Moscow.
Photo by Grace
Warnecke.

NEW WATERS

BY GRACE
KENNAN
WARNECKE

My new single life in San Francisco was jolted by a telephone call from John Wasserman, the funny and outrageous music critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, whom I barely knew. “How would you like to go to Russia with Joan Baez?” he asked.

He explained that Joan Baez was to be part of a much-headlined concert, with Santana and the Beach Boys, in Winter Palace Square in Leningrad on July 4, 1978. The Bay Area impresario Bill Graham was organizing the show. Wasserman was looking for an appropriate folk song for Joan to sing in Russian, as well as a Russian speaker to accompany her on the trip as a translator and companion. For me, this was an amazing opportunity. I was being given a free trip to the Soviet Union, an opportunity to brush up on my Russian, and a chance to be part of the inner circle of an American folk icon whom I had admired for years. I couldn’t wait.

I rushed out and bought all of Joan Baez’s records. As usual, I was flying blind. I did not know any Russian folk singers, so I called all my Russian friends and one came up with a song, “Circle of Friends,” by Bulat Okudzhava, a well-known poet and bard. Often played and sung on the underground circuit, Okudzhava’s works were just beginning to be officially published. He was, like Joan, a popular protester.

Sitting at the press conference when Bill Graham announced this concert, surrounded by musical celebrities, I relished being part of the rock music scene. My children were impressed. I treasured my passport with its hard-to-come-by Russian visa. A week before we were to leave, however, Grigory Romanov, second secretary of the Communist Party in Leningrad, abruptly canceled the trip. I was crushed.

A few days later, John Wasserman called to say that Joan Baez had a new proposal. Since Joan had cleared her schedule for this trip and we had our visas, why didn’t the three of us take the trip, anyway, but go to Moscow instead of Lenin-

grad? Joan wanted to meet with the famous physicist and political dissident Andrei Sakharov. Sakharov, known as the father of the Soviet hydrogen bomb, had shocked the Soviet government by coming out against nuclear testing and was now an intellectual hero in the West.

I accepted Joan’s invitation but realized that this was a very different deal. In the original journey, with Bill Graham making the arrangements, there was a large staff seeing that everything was done for us; now *I* was the staff. John’s role was to write a series of articles about the journey for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, not to mention keeping Joan amused. I was to take the photographs to accompany John’s pieces, but I was also in charge of all logistics. While what we proposed to do was not illegal, I was acutely aware it would be viewed with skepticism by the Soviet authorities.

Joan was able to contact Sakharov’s stepdaughter, Tatiana, who had recently immigrated to the United States and was living in the Boston area. Through Tatiana we received

hand-drawn maps showing how to find Sakharov's apartment, because accurate Moscow city maps were not available at the time. Joan collected presents and letters for the Sakharovs, but I warned her that giving money was strictly illegal and could get us into serious trouble. Joan had already gone to jail in the States for blocking the entrance to an armed forces induction center, but I had no desire to end up in a Soviet prison.

The three of us set off on the long flight from San Francisco, routed via New York and Helsinki. John's suitcase, reflecting his macabre sense of humor, featured large stenciled letters saying VOYAGE OF THE DAMNED, attracting attention wherever we went. John availed himself of all the free drinks offered on the business class flight and was looking distinctly green by the time we arrived at Helsinki Airport. Sitting in the transit lounge, John roused himself from his stupor and whispered to me, "I think she's bringing money for the Jewish dissidents."

"What makes you think so?" I asked, my stomach suddenly tightening.

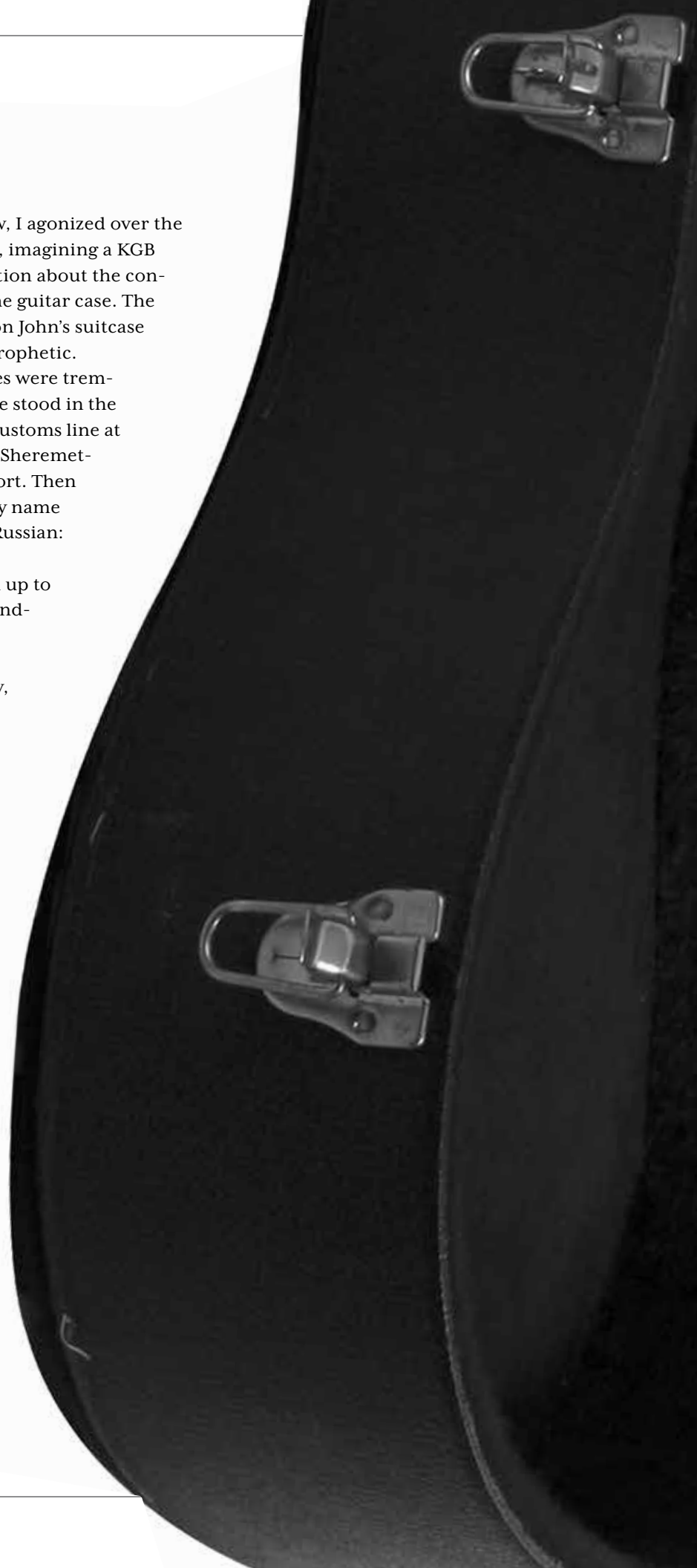
John gestured. "Notice that she is taking the guitar case with her to the bathroom. That's not normal. Why doesn't she leave it with us?"


I felt sick. Of course I could have made a scene and said that I wouldn't go if Joan was smuggling in money, but we were almost there and I didn't have the heart, or maybe the guts. We only suspected that there was money in the guitar case; we weren't certain. Besides, John was seriously hungover, so maybe this observation just reflected alcohol-induced paranoia. On the plane from Helsinki

to Moscow, I agonized over the prospects, imagining a KGB interrogation about the contents of the guitar case. The message on John's suitcase seemed prophetic.

My knees were trembling as we stood in the dreaded customs line at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport. Then I heard my name called in Russian: "Greis."

I looked up to see the handsome face of Nikita Mikhailkov, a famous





Russian film director, for whom I had recently translated at a Berkeley film festival. Nikita was returning to Moscow after receiving an Italian medal, Leone d'Oro—the Golden Lion—in Venice. I introduced him to Joan. Happily, he knew all about her and had heard her music. “It’s ridiculous that you are standing in this queue,” he said. “Come with me. I will introduce you.” We trotted behind as he led us up to the head of the customs line. There he introduced Joan Baez as the famous folk singer from America, a great artist, and even added that I was the daughter of a former ambassador to the Soviet Union. It didn’t hurt that Nikita’s father was the composer of the Soviet national anthem. The customs official made a notation in our passports, gave a wave, and the next thing we knew we had crossed the border. None of our possessions had been examined. Nikita then invited us to a dinner the next night in his studio. Joan’s trip was started, and my stomach relaxed.

We settled into the massive Hotel Rossiya, reputedly the second-largest hotel in the world, but Joan and I had to share a room, as the manager claimed that the giant edifice was full. Before that, our relationship had been formal, but now those barriers relaxed.

I learned she had a wicked sense of humor, an uncanny ability to mimic people, and could turn a charm button on and off almost at will.

Joan and I both suffered from jet-lag-induced insomnia, so we stayed up nights and she shared a lot about her life as a singer, her love affair with Bob Dylan, other romances, her marriage, political protests, and her beloved son, Gabriel. Somehow she wasn’t so interested in Charles, Adair, and Kevin. I learned she had a wicked sense of humor, an uncanny ability to mimic people, and could turn a charm button on and off almost at will.

The second day in Moscow we set off, with the guitar, to visit a Jewish dissident group to whom Joan had an introduction through a peace group in Boston. They were expecting us. I located the apartment—not easy to do, as many apartment entrances in the older buildings of Moscow are off courtyards and poorly marked. Five or six men and women welcomed us into a tiny apartment. It seemed strange to see a bed pillow on the living room floor with a cord leading out from it, until a woman lifted up the pillow and pointed to the telephone that the pillow was muffling. The dissidents discussed their situation: they had mostly lost their jobs and were waiting for their exit visas, but they were uncertain whether they would receive them. As soon as Joan started



to say she had brought something, I shook my head violently and handed her my notepad, on which I'd scrawled, "Write it down." As John and I suspected, she had brought money for the group and wanted to give it to them. The amount was large. The spokeswoman for the group became agitated. She took me into the bathroom and explained in a whisper next to a gushing faucet that if they accepted money from a foreigner they would risk imprisonment or worse. We soon left. While I was glad that we had not endangered any members of the group, I began to get that sinking feeling again. It was now definite that Joan was carrying undeclared money.

From then on, our life became a whirlwind. Andrei Konchalovsky, a half brother of Nikita Mikhalkov and a well-known film director for whom I had also translated in Berkeley, called and invited us to lunch at his mother's dacha. Joan's usual charm was muted, as she didn't like being dragged out of Moscow—a trip that would have been pure heaven



Top to bottom: A collage of Grace in Russia, by Alexandra Chalif; Grace and Renee Volen on their way to Moscow, 1989.

for most Muscovites. What's more, this expedition took place before Joan Baez had confided to me that she suffered from a form of hypoglycemia, which required that she eat something every three hours or become cranky and withdrawn. The trip home from the dacha consisted of Andrei trying to make conversation and Joan staring sullenly into space. From then on, I carried food for her.

When we returned to our hotel that afternoon, there was a crisis with our room: the hotel manager announced we had to leave the next day, citing a regulation that foreigners were allowed to stay in Moscow for only three days. I went down to the front desk and successfully untangled this bureaucratic snafu by inventing an imaginary concert at which Joan was going to sing. This trip was definitely honing my improvisational talents. When I went back upstairs, I was stunned to see a line of maids in the hall outside our room, listening to the pure bell-like tones of Joan's voice singing "Imagine." Little housework was done that afternoon on the fifth floor of the Hotel Rossiya.

Through Nikita Mikhalkov, I obtained Okudzhava's phone number. I called and told the bard how much Joan wanted to meet him and how she had memorized his song. He invited us to his apartment. After some introductory back and forth, Joan sang his song, accompanied by her guitar. Each was instantly smitten with the other, and I felt that this trip was turning into a success.

Back at our hotel, the phone started to ring. Radio Moscow and various newspapers had gotten wind

of Joan's presence and wanted interviews. One of these journalists was a young man; I'll call him Volodya. He had met Joan in Cuba and wanted to renew the friendship, even move on to a more intimate phase. Joan gave him an interview but did not welcome his attention. She told me that she did not want to see him anymore, and for the rest of the trip I found myself running interference.

The next day was the visit to Sakharov and the focus of our trip. We had been warned that the government had taken the house number off his building, as well as off each apartment on his floor. I felt very conspicuous as we set forth carrying the ever-present guitar. We took a taxi but asked the driver to drop us a few blocks away. By following Tatiana's map, we arrived at what we calculated was the right building, entered the door code, and went up to the designated floor. The lightbulbs on that floor had been removed, so the hallway was pitch dark. We counted the doorways by feel along the corridor.

Joan had assured me that Sakharov was expecting us, but when we knocked on the door, a very surprised Elena Bonner, Sakharov's wife, peered at us through her thick dark-rimmed glasses. "Who are you?" she asked.

We stood awkwardly in the hall while I explained, and Sakharov finally approached the door and said, "Oh, yes, I did receive a call that someone was coming, but I didn't know who, and, besides, I thought it was tomorrow." We were invited in and sat down at the kitchen table, where we were offered tea. It was clear that Joan Baez meant nothing to them.

The more they talked, with me feverishly translating, the further apart they seemed.

Joan started out looking for common ground by discussing one of her favorite causes—the plight of the people in Chile and Bangladesh—but Sakharov was not interested. The more they talked, with me feverishly translating, the further apart they seemed. He finally said, "You know, we have so many problems here that I am not interested in problems overseas or in what the American government is or is not doing. It was nice of you to come, but I don't see the point."

Joan, always quick to size up a situation, changed the subject. "Andrei," she said, "could I just play you a few songs?"

"Go ahead," he answered, pointing up at the ceiling. "Even they like music."

So Joan started singing and playing the guitar, and her melodic voice quickly made the direct contact with the Sakharovs that she couldn't achieve through mere dialogue. Afterward, we engaged in spirited conversation and Elena Bonner fed us a light meal. When we left, we exchanged warm hugs and good feelings. "Walk a few blocks and then turn onto another street," advised Sakharov. "The taxis have been told not to stop outside this building."

That afternoon my friend Andrei Voznesensky, the poet, and his wife, the writer Zoya Boguslavskaya, invited us out to their dacha in Peredelkino, the famous writers'

So Joan started singing and playing the guitar, and her melodic voice quickly made the direct contact with the Sakharovs that she couldn't achieve through mere dialogue.

colony. I had bonded with Andrei and Zoya during the Kennedy trip in 1974. While I fed Joan pilfered rolls from the hotel breakfast, a friend drove us out to the dacha.

In 1978, the famous poets in the Soviet Union had reputations similar to rock stars in the States. A big poetry reading would draw thousands. Unlike Sakharov, Voznesensky immediately took to Joan. After tea and a little wine, Andrei offered to read some poems. But in fact he didn't read, he declaimed. His sonorous voice reverberated through the small dacha, and soon Joan answered with her favorites—"Diamonds and Rust," "Imagine," and other standbys. It was magical. By the end of the evening, the Voznesenskys had offered to give a dinner for her in a country restaurant. Andrei promised to invite Okudzhava, ensuring Joan's attendance.

We were really on a roll. I was working flat out, translating for Joan's interviews, making arrangements, and taking pictures, while John Wasserman kept us amused and enjoyed all the hospitality. The Voznesenskys called and said that they had arranged for Joan to give a concert at the restaurant and had invited the cream of Moscow's intelligentsia to attend. I was ner-

vous about the concert, because some of Joan's songs were difficult to translate properly. "Diamonds and Rust" was a good example.

When we arrived at the roadside restaurant in the woods, we found about thirty people waiting for us in a large private room on the second floor. Many well-known figures were there, including Brezhnev's handsome interpreter, Victor Sukhodrev, whom I had met on the Kennedy trip. After he and Joan conversed, he pulled me aside. "Don't worry," he announced with authority. "You can relax; I will translate for her." Greatly relieved, I sat down and became a guest and was able to converse with people on my own.

Eventually, Joan stood up and sang one song, eliciting rapt attention from the guests. "What a success," I thought. Then Joan put her guitar down and said she wanted to say something. "Thank you for this warm reception. I'm sorry, however; I am not used to singing in private rooms for the select few. I appreciate the dinner, but please excuse me, as I want to go downstairs and sing for the people."

Angrily, Sukhodrev turned to me. "From now on you can translate!" Everyone else looked as shocked as I felt.

Joan and I went downstairs, and I explained Joan's request to a startled restaurant manager. After a long delay, he found a microphone and some sound equipment, and to the total surprise of the restaurant patrons, Joan gave an impromptu concert, with me translating after each song. I was concentrating so hard that I only dimly remember some of the guests from above coming down. Joan was triumphant. The Voznesenskys waited for us, and it

must have been two in the morning when we returned to the hotel. Our departure for New York was to be later that day.

The phone rang as soon as we got back to our room. It was Volodya. He already had heard all about Joan's impromptu concert and said the news was the sensation of Moscow. He wanted to meet us at the airport and interview Joan. I found this a great idea, since I was now worried about getting the guitar and its contents through customs without incident. Volodya was a well-connected journalist and I thought he could help.

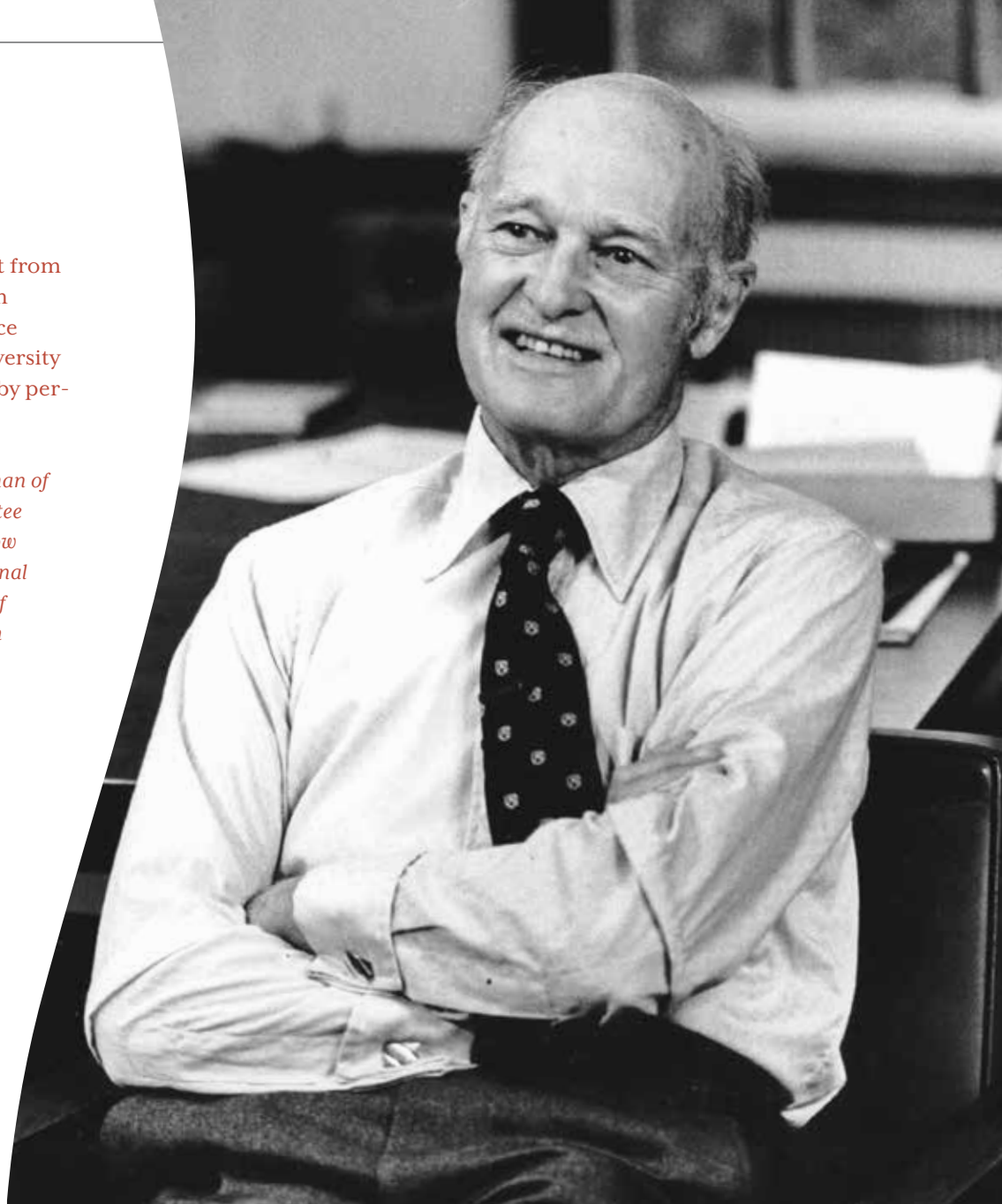
Joan, on the other hand, was adamant. "I don't want to see Volodya. I've had enough interviews. Tell him no."

A few hours later, bleary-eyed and tired, we set off for the airport. As our taxi pulled up to Sheremetyevo Airport, sitting on the curb was Volodya. By now fear had given me courage to confront Joan. "Joan, you must speak to him. It is important. Don't ask why." She looked surprised but smiled at him and answered his questions. Volodya offered to escort us into the airport. We had a coffee and then he led us to the customs line. The next thing I knew, he flashed an ID that I couldn't see, mumbled something to the agent, and again we were given the VIP treatment, sailing through customs with no one so much as looking at the precious guitar case and its contents.

My photos were used as the backdrop when Joan was interviewed about the trip on the *Today* show, and they illustrated John Wasserman's articles in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. My future as a photographer seemed clear to me, but pieces in the puzzle soon shifted. ■

Editor's note: This is an excerpt from the chapter "New Waters," from *Daughter of the Cold War*, by Grace Kennan Warnecke © 2018, University of Pittsburgh Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Grace Kennan Warnecke is chairman of the board of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy. A fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and member of the advisory council of the Kennan Institute, she is former chair of the National Advisory Council at the Harriman Institute. She is a narrator in the Harriman Institute's oral history project.



Top to bottom: George Kennan, 1982; photo by Grace Warnecke. Grace and Secretary of State Colin Powell.