

THE SONYA CHAPTER

by Francis Baumli

(This little story is one more contribution in my attempt at putting forth a kind of autobiography by gathering summations, anecdotes, and stories which I have told elsewhere, and presenting them here as a sort of corpus opuscula. The present story, proffered here, will seem confusing unless I give a preliminary explanation: The Gateway Audio Society of Saint Louis, Missouri, is an audiophile society with its own website. Members commonly do postings—as they are called—and I had, partly in jest and also being serious, asked why I remain a “Junior Member” of this Society instead of now being called a “Full Member” considering that I have belonged for so long. With mild consternation I observed that I had, only a few months before, turned the ripe old age of 65, and feared that I would go from being a Junior Member to a Geriatric Member with no interim status as a Full Member. I politely queried as to what kind of obeisance should be shown, and to whom, so that I might attain the status of Full Member before succumbing to senectitude. The reply informed me that I do not become a Full Member until I have contributed 300 “posts,” and at present I have only about 50. There ensued, by other members, considerate discussion, considerable digression, and a subsequent

straying into the regions of a very different topic. As a way of bringing this matter to a genteel and humorous conclusion, I wrote the below commentary. After posting it on the Gateway Audio Society site, I realized that this bit of autobiography perhaps deserves promulgation, if for no other reason than so Baumli may, once again, candidly confess to the world the details, the folly, and the peregrinations of that dissipated life he led during his youth. I have amended the original version of this story only slightly, adding small details, occasionally modifying grammar for clarity, but mainly I have left it in its original form.)

So thus, and heretofore, (and also atavistically):

It somehow seems appropriate to start a new avenue of communication on this topic, since the last foray went off into the remote (albeit enjoyable) hinterlands of other topics.

In my earlier communiqué I was posing questions about my "Junior Member" status, and perhaps registering a mild protest. But here I want to reveal that I have encountered, if not exactly an epiphany, then at least a fervent change of heart about this subject. I deserve to be called a Junior Member now and forever, and I want to be. This matter merits explanation.

Back in spring of 1978 (now over a third of a century ago), I was at the airport in Minneapolis changing planes, headed home. A very small girl—actually a woman, but she seemed so young—was employed there in

the terminal and was handling luggage with an ease that belied her size. At some point she spoke to me about my luggage. Noting her accent, I asked her where she was from, and she replied, "Poland." I asked her what part of Poland she hailed from. This kind of query is, I believe, important. It allows a person, who is a foreigner on your soil, to know you are taking a personal interest in them. She answered that she was from Warsaw, and asked if I had ever been there. I told her I hadn't been there, and so we both proceeded with our separate business at hand.

A few minutes later I received the depressing news that my plane was going to be two hours late, so I sat down in a chair, looking rather glum I am sure. A minute later the same young woman sat down beside me and wanted to know where I was from. She was just now off work and wanted to chat a few minutes before going back to her apartment. So we chatted, and then the even more depressing news came in on the overhead speaker that my plane would be six hours late. I needed to be getting home!

But I accepted the fact that there would be a long wait and settled in so I could talk with and get to know this young woman. She was so small as to warrant being called tiny: "five-foot-two and eyes of blue." Slender as a reed, she weighed exactly 100 pounds, and she had blonde hair in a pageboy haircut. (Her height, and weight, I would learn later.) Her small face was heart shaped (a friend would later describe her face as "Valentine shaped") and strikingly beautiful. We talked longer, and then we had—shall

I term it?—an encounter.

I don't think they exist in airports anymore, but back then, in most major airports, right in the middle or at the side of certain terminals, there were suites of sound-proof sleeping rooms. A person on business could rent these, strictly for sleeping, at a rate which usually was just under \$200 an hour. A huge amount of money, that was, but I suppose business accounts were generous back then—especially considering that, unlike today's convenience of email and telephone conferences, so much business had to involve travel. I had never been in one of these little sleeping rooms, so my companion (I would learn her name was Sonya), since she had a key took me to see one. Indeed it was tiny. There was a miniscule lavatory, no shower, and a small bed. And the sound-proofing worked; you couldn't even hear the announcer outside. Sonya and I stayed in that little room over an hour, and when we emerged (after she had carefully put everything back in order), my life was somewhat changed. It had been agreed that she would come and visit me where I lived outside of Columbia, Missouri. And this would happen fairly soon since she was quitting her job.

Before her job in Minneapolis, she had been working in downtown New York. There she worked as a waitress in a small restaurant that was just around the corner from a headband factory. This occasioned some confusion, but finally I figured out that she meant headphone factory, and the factory in question was none other than Grado Labs. In fact she knew

their chief engineer, John Chaipis, whom I knew very well. He and I talked on the phone about once a month. Sonya said he often came to the cafe where she worked, and later, I would find out that he remembered Sonya well. From the tone of his voice one might speculate that he had been quite smitten by her.

About four weeks later, after preliminary phone calls, Sonya came to my place in the country. She brought all her luggage. Clearly she meant to stay a while.

There commenced a very pleasurable and memorable chapter in my life. Sonya was always intense. When we talked about the mundane details of the day, or what had happened in earlier years of our lives, or our artistic interests the topic always warranted nothing less than a thoroughly intense discussion. With Sonya there was never, ever a frivolous conversation.

Regarding other matters: As the Brits so charmingly put it, "The bed was busy." Also she loved living in the country, never having spent time outside a city before. In Warsaw and New York she didn't have the opportunity, and in Minneapolis she didn't have the time. So living with me, and since I was so busy, she would strike out walking and be gone for as long as ten hours, always returning even more invigorated than when she left. Sonya was just ecstatic the evening I took her in to Columbia and bought her a good pair of hiking boots. (She returned the favor, copiously, later that night.)

She loved "living out in the bushes" (as I put it), and was truly happy with these rural environs. Her energy, and her beauty, were thoroughly captivating, and I was astonished by her physical strength. I had before seen her hefting that heavy luggage at the airport. But one day I saw something more impressive. A friend in Columbia had built a new fitness center, and he had just completed a new weight room. He wanted me to come see it. So Sonya and I drove there, and when we went in the front door, we discovered that we were immediately in the weight room. There, on the floor, was a huge 400-pound barbell. I asked Jim, who was very muscular, if he could put that above his head. No; he couldn't, but one of his clients used it for leg-lifts. I decided that I wasn't going to even try to lift it. Next to it was a smaller barbell, and I asked Jim how much it weighed. He bent down, read the numbers on the various attached weights, and said, "Counting the center bar, exactly 100 pounds." I knew I could lift that, so I grabbed it and put it above my head, then set it down. Sonya then stepped forward, picked it up, and put it above her head. I was impressed, but not so much that I failed to notice how she so quizzically looked at us, as if to ask why anyone would want to do something so useless. Jim and I looked at one another. I knew that Sonya had just put her own weight above her head. I was trim, weighed about 175, but I wasn't sure I could put my own weight above my head. (I would later find out that I could, but I don't believe I accomplished this feat as easily as Sonya did.) I was about to ask Sonya to try and lift that 400-pound barbell, but Jim was already hurrying

us on to the next room, wanting to show us his new steam bath. A little while later we would leave by a side-door, so I didn't get a second opportunity for seeing what Sonya could do with 400 pounds of gravity.

There was only one thing about Sonya that was difficult, and this was her tendency to argue about certain unusual expressions in the English language. She could understand and accept some expressions, e.g., the fact that the cafe she had worked at in New York was "around the corner" from Grado Labs even though it was actually about a block away. And she absolutely loved the expression, "burning the candle at both ends." But other expressions she could not and would not accept. For example, once when I said, "We've got to get to bed. Morning's going to come early," she was nothing less than irate. "Morning come early?" That was redundant, ridiculous, and an educated man like me should never say it. Another time, we went to the library to get some books in Polish for her. Some were in "reserve rooms" and could not be checked out. Others required a \$20 deposit. When we were checking some out, the woman behind the desk reminded us that these required a \$20 deposit "up front." Sonya turned and walked away, and I asked her where she was going. She said, "Up front at the entrance to pay the deposit." I had to explain that "up front" in this case did not mean the front of the building, and I then tried to explain what "up front" means in terms of paying money. She thought this absurd, and never, ever would accept this expression. We would have many a "discussion" later about some such saying, with her being

indignant and irate, and me being patient and trying to play the role of teacher. But she was dogmatic about such things, would not budge, and declared that if she was going to "master" English then she was not going to indulge in the lapses that Americans allowed themselves. Some expressions she accepted, like, "scraping the bottom of the barrel," or, "keep your chin up." But something as simple as, "forge ahead," could keep us up half the night arguing. She was, one might say, an amateur intellectual. Her mind was often errant but always busy. And she was an amazing correspondent. She would spend two hours every evening writing letters, always one to her parents, others to old friends and relatives. She wrote in a beautiful hand, usually in Polish, sometimes in Russian which she knew well, occasionally in English. One of the people she wrote a few times was her former boyfriend.

Bless her heart, she did make some attempt at accepting what she called the "philistine vagaries" of the English language. She tried to do this by inventing certain expressions of her own. Some made absolutely no sense to me although, unlike Sonya's penchant, I did not try to argue her out of using them. These were nonsensical ones involved fabrications such as "cow milk pure," "peaceful as an old dog's tail," and "yellow page crazy." Some made a little sense, e.g., "car dust dirty" and "innocent as a rock." Others were nice, as when she started calling a certain part of my anatomy, "Junior." This she thought immensely funny, at first, but soon

she took a more measured view of the matter and then the name was appropriate and appreciated.

It was interesting, too, that she took adamant issue with the spelling of her name. She showed me how it is spelled in both Polish and Russian. Rather different from the English, I admitted. She had accepted "Sonya" on her official paperwork when she first came to the States and did not know English very well, but now she wished it had been spelled "Sonia" or "Sonja." Always, always, this female was busy, if not with her body then with her mind.

"So why did you let her get away?!" a lawyer friend of mine asked a few months later. Well; her time in this country was coming to an end. Her visa, or work card, or whatever she had (I don't remember) was soon to expire. Her parents, meanwhile, had moved to St. Petersburg where her father had a new business. She would have to return there via Poland. The only way to keep that from happening was to get married. Yes; married. At first she hinted. Then she wanted to "discuss" it. Then she, outright, without the encumbrance of any romantic accoutrements, proposed. However, I had serious reservations. My divorce from my first wife had been finalized only about three months before. I was still raw and skittish. Plus I was quite aware of a lacking in our relationship that was so huge as to rightly be called a void. Although our relationship was intense, enjoyable, chronically carnal, and seemed to have everything to recommend it, the truth was Sonya did not have one bit of a certain elusive

quality in her: she had no gentleness, no tenderness, no ... love. It was obvious that we were not "in love" with each other; I don't think we even felt a bit of basic love for one another. We enjoyed, plumed, and plundered one another, but we did not love each other. We of course discussed this, and she took the view that people "learn" to love one another. I did not quite share this view. She was 23, I was 29, and neither of us could claim wisdom about the peregrinations, much less, the veracity of love.

Her parents were now in St. Petersburg, and she had learned that her old boyfriend was making plans to move there from Warsaw in hopes of rekindling their relationship. I asked her to tell me about him, and of course this turned into an intense discussion. He was a factory worker, a poet, a romantic. Also he was tall, very muscular and athletic, but he drank too much and he had abused her. I asked her if he had abused her often or had injured her. She replied that no, he had never injured her, and he had abused her only once—he had hit her. "He decided he would never do that again as he was picking himself up off the floor," she said with a defiant look in her blue eyes. I remembered that 100-pound barbell. She left him over that incident. Good for her.

When finally I flatly refused marriage she was disappointed but she did not cry, rage, or sulk. With Sonya, all was intense, practical, and devoid of love. So even though we had plumed and plundered, we also sundered. I never heard from her again. I'm sure I know what happened. She met up

with her old boyfriend, he promised to quit drinking, and Sonya decided that a bird in the hand is worth more than a reluctant Baumli out in the bush. So even though she had promised to write me, she never did.

A person reading this account might well wonder why I would have reason for going on so long about Sonya, when the topic—my status as “junior member”—would appear to be quite different. Well, actually the topic is not different at all. I have come to realize that since this beautiful, strong, unique Sonya chose to call my member junior, junior member is what I want to be called by the Gateway Audio Society. Now and forevermore. Toward this end, I shall advance as few "posts" as possible so as to retain this deserved nomenclature. All, you realize, for the sake of nostalgically honoring Sonya, who wisely did us both the favor of knowing when to bring our romance to a gentle terminus.

Junior Member for Life,

Francis Baumli

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