



Dancing on Thin Ice: Travails of a Russian Dissenter

Arkady Polishchuk

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Dancing on Thin Ice, Arkady Polishchuk's memoir of life as a Russian dissident, uses an icepick forged of sardonic wit and personal experience to pierce deep into the hide of the Soviet system.

Welcome to the USSR—specifically, to the prison cell Polishchuk has been awarded for the crime of being a thorn in the paw of the iron-fisted government. The conditions are subhuman, the climate of paranoia overwhelming: answering a question posed by a seemingly sympathetic guard could result in years in a Siberian camp.

From here, the narrative tracks back to the 1950s, when Polishchuk first ran afoul of authorities at the state-run publication he worked for. It follows his transformation from being a state-supervised journalist to an outspoken dissident to, after being exiled in 1977, his continued efforts on behalf of Christians and Jews in Russia.

The book takes a sharp look at the dysfunction of the Soviet system, offering details that no one in the West could imagine. It's a place where a luxury apartment for a family of four is so defined because it has a bedroom, and where an Etch-a-Sketch is considered "sophisticated spy equipment" from abroad. Such details, and the ironic humor with which they're told, keep the pace brisk. Even Soviet rot and rust are portrayed with flair, as when a rattletrap bus bumping over potholes is likened to "a giant tambourine."

There's also a deep well of humanity in the narrative, making its sharp edges cut all the deeper. As Polishchuk's dissident activities increase, the book moves to more serious matters but loses none of its absorbing qualities. Tension mounts as the day of exile approaches, and though departure brings relief, it's mingled with the pain of leaving friends and family behind. Final chapters on reestablishing life in New York and Los Angeles are also interesting.

An important memoir by a fearless man, *Dancing on Thin Ice* is an eye-opening reminder of what life was really like in the Soviet system.

SUSAN WAGGONER (July/August 2018)

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