



Bears in the caviar

Charles Thayer

In his book *Bears in the caviar*, Charles Thayer, an official at the American Embassy in Moscow in the 30's, described the receptions held by his boss, Ambassador William C. Bullit, at the Spaso House in Moscow. Mikhail Bulgakov was on some of those receptions where he found his inspiration for The Great Ball at Satan's in The Master and Margarita.

From the archives of the website
The Master and Margarita

<http://www.masterandmargarita.eu>

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Introduction

For the details of The Great Ball at Satan's in *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov found his inspiration from the eccentric receptions organized by the American ambassador **William Christian Bullitt** (1873-1953) at the *Spaso House* in Moscow in 1934 and 1935.

Mikhail Bulgakov and his spouse **Elena Sergeevna Shilovskaya** (1893-1970), born **Nyurenberg** were regular visitors of such receptions. In her diary, Elena Sergeevna described a reception - which she called a ball - held at the the Spaso House.

«I have never seen such ball in my life. They were all carrying tail coats, there were only a few jackets and smokings.

They danced in a room with columns lit by streams of light coming from a gallery; behind a gate which separated them from the orchestra, there were living pheasants and other birds. We had dinner at small tables in a huge dining room with, in a corner, living baby bears, goats and roosters in cages. During dinner, musicians played the accordeon.

In the room where we had dinner, the table where we were sitting was covered with a green transparant cloth lit from inside. There were armfuls of tulips and roses. I do not mention the abundance of food and champagne. On the upper floor (it is a big and luxurious mansion) they had arranged a room with a grillroom for shashlik and people were doing Caucasian dances.

We wanted to leave the place at half past three but they did not allow us to leave. We left at half past five in one of the cars of the embassy. A certain Steiger, I believe, a man whom we do not know but whom all Moscow knows and who can always be found when there are foreigners, joined us in the car. He was sitting next to the driver and we were in the rear. It was already daylight when we arrived home.»

The man Steiger, mentioned by Elena Sergeevna, was **Boris Sergeevich (von) Steiger** (1892-1937), the «stool pigeon» who was the prototype for **Baron Meigel** in *The Master and Margarita*.

The reception described by Elena Sergeevna was the *Spring Festival* which William Bullitt organised on April 23, 1935. Some months before, his 1934 *Christmas Party* had already caused much noise in Moscow. Both receptions were a source of inspiration for Mikhail Bulgakov for both the location and the setting of *The Great Ball at Satan's* in *The Master and Margarita*.

Charles Thayer

In the early 30's, the American citizen **Charles Thayer** (1910-1969) went to Russia via Intourist. He overstayed his permit in Moscow and was saved from serious trouble only by getting a post with the newly established American Embassy.

So Thayer started working for Ambassador William Bullitt. He got involved in the organisation of the eccentric receptions and described them in a hilarious way in his book *Bears in the caviar* which was published in 1951. In this document you can read *Seals in the Kitchen* about the 1934 *Christmas Party*, and *Bears in the Ballroom* about the 1935 *Spring Festival*.

Charles Thayer

Seals in the Kitchen

When the American Embassy arrived in Moscow in 1933, there was already a large colony of American newspapermen, engineers, students and fellow-travelling do-gooders. In these days Moscow provided plenty of attractions in the way of excellent theatre, lush opera and ballet and even night-clubs of a peculiar Muscovite sort. It was easy to buy tickets to the Moscow Art Theatre - one of the best of its kind in the world - or to the ballet - the only one of its kind in the world; and a good dinner at the Metropole or the Medved Restaurant was cheap enough. (Today, I'm told, theatre tickets are distributed according to the rank of the prospective purchaser - Generals in the parterre, Colonels in the balconies, other ranks in the fresh air.) But there was no central meeting place for Americans like the Embassies of other foreigners.

So when Christmas, 1934, drew near, Ambassador Bullitt told me to arrange a party for the American colony.

«And make it good», he insisted. «They've been long enough without a real shindig». Unfortunately, he was called back to Washington before the holiday for consultation with the President, and his Counselor, **John Wiley**, was to act as host instead.

So I went to work.

For all its theatres and ballets and operas, Moscow isn't exactly an **Elsa Maxwell**⁽¹⁾ paradise. Somehow or other, the *State Planning Commission* had overlooked the lighter side of social progress. There were a handful of jazz bands which were engaged by various hotels and they were rather reluctant to come to Embassies. There were no catering firms to prepare large dinners. There were no accessible theatrical agencies from where you could order up a *song-and-dance* act. There wasn't even an Elsa Maxwell.

Gradually we learned how to use a little ingenuity in getting around these omissions in the Socialist system. But this was our first attempt and I was starting from scratch.

I went to the wife of the Embassy's Counselor, **Irena Wiley**, and explained the problem. «Let's glass over the big ballroom floor and make an aquarium we can dance on», she said. As a first suggestion, it showed imagination, but I pointed out that plate glass had been somehow overlooked in both the First and Second *Five-Year-Plans*. Besides, what would we use for fish?

«Perhaps you're right. How about an animal act? Let's go to the Zoo and see what they have to offer», Irena said.

That sounded better and together we called on the Director of the Zoo. He was a nervous little man, obviously not entirely at his ease in talking to foreigners. You would have thought

that directing a zoo would normally be considered a fairly safe non-political sort of job even in the Soviet Union. However, I remembered that one of my few Russian friends had been Director of the Zoo during the Revolution and had been fired for letting the only elephant which survived the overthrow of the Czar die. (My friend was subsequently shot during the purges for crimes not specified). Perhaps the present Director had some sick elephants. Or perhaps he was just reluctant to get involved in so hot a political issue as a foreign religious holiday. At any rate he was not enthusiastic and very little help.

From the Zoo we went to the *Durov Animal Museum*. The Durovs were a well-known family of animal trainers for a generation or more before the Revolution. They had been famous all over Europe. In their honour the Soviet Government had established a museum of live and dead animals. One of the exhibits I remember very well. I had first visited the Museum with the daughter of a Scandinavian diplomat. An attendant pointed out a gaudy cockatoo sitting peacefully on a perch.

«You will notice that the bird isn't chained and yet it never tries to get off its perch», the attendant said. «The reason is that for twenty years the bird was chained to the perch and after the chain was taken off, she had lost any thought of leaving it».

«That's a hell of a thing to show a Soviet audience», my companion muttered. «How many years is it since the Revolution?»

Aside from the cockatoo there was not much material for a team of entertainers at the Museum.

As a last resort we went to the Circus. In Moscow the Circus is more like a theatre. It has only one ring housed in a permanent building and operates all the year round. There we saw some trained horses (not very good for parquet floors), some trained dogs (not very original at best), some trained bears (a little lethargic, we decided, for a Christmas party and besides someone might try to make some political capital out of our replacing Santa Claus by a bear that walked like a man). And then we saw the seals. There were three of them - **Misha, Shura and Lyuba**. They did all the regular seal acts, bouncing balls on their noses, climbing ladders while balancing their little dunce caps, and even playing tunes on the harmonica (only instead of *The Stars and Stripes Forever* they played the Internationale).

As soon as the act was over, we went down to see the seal trainer, a young man also of the Durov family, though, we gathered, not a direct descendant of the Great Durovs. He was still in his early twenties and free of most inhibitions. At first he seemed a little reluctant. «I've never had my seals in a ballroom».

I told him that so far as we knew, the ballroom had never had seals in it. But that was no way for a young Soviet citizen to talk. There was first times for everything - and this would be a double first. The argument impressed him.

«I suppose that if we can have two or three rehearsals at the Embassy, they might take to it all right».

They did. Late the next evening after the last performance at the Circus, Durov and his seals arrived in a truck for their first dress rehearsal. We built a sort of chute like a sheep-run from a side door into an unused service room which we set aside for the seals' dressing room. From it we arranged another chute into the big ballroom itself.

It's quite a sight to see three big black seals come prancing into a ballroom - particularly into the ballroom at *Spaso House* with its white polished marble pillars and equally white walls that sparkle like icebergs in the sun when the chandeliers are all on. Apparently, even the seals thought they were icebergs for they slithered across the floor to the nearest pillar, cuddled up beside it and acted as though they were coming out of the native rookeries for their morning toilette. It took several housemaids with mops to clean up after them while Durov tried to explain to them that they must act housebroken in the American Embassy. With that first lesson over, the seals went through the special routine we'd developed for them and eventually - in the early hours of the morning - they slithered back into their truck and went home to bed at the Circus.

For two more nights preceding Christmas Eve, the seals rehearsed their act at the Embassy, leaving themselves, the trainer and me completely exhausted. But by this time Durov was thoroughly enthusiastic about the whole idea. He even wanted to add a bear to the act. He explained he had two bears - one he'd had for several years, the other he had just bought in Siberia. He admitted the second was pretty wild and had developed a rather nasty habit of killing people. But he promised he'd only bring the nice bear. However, I figured three seals were enough for one party and suggested he bring the nice bear around another time.

On the night of the party, Durov and his seals arrived through a side gate and his seals were surreptitiously chuted into their dressing room till the moment for their show. What with having had no sleep for several nights and with all the excitement of his first Embassy appearance (it was his last too), Durov seemed to need a little stimulant to put him on his toes. So I took him out among the guests, introducing him as a newly arrived American engineer. (The fact that he spoke no English confused some of the guests but, on Christmas Eve in Moscow, things like that are apt to happen.) I poured a couple of whiskies into him and when the time for his act came, he seemed thoroughly restored.

We collected the guests in one end of the large ballroom and turned out all the lights. Then through the little door at the far end of the room, a small Christmas tree with twelve lighted candles swayed precariously into the room to all appearances supported only by a large black moustache. Then a spotlight went on and revealed Lyuba hiding under the moustache and balancing the tree on her nose. Behind her pranced Misha and Shura, one carrying a tray of wine glasses and the other a bottle of champagne. Durov poured one or two glasses and distributed them among the guests. Then he lifted the champagne bottle to his mouth and drained it. This last piece of business hadn't been in the rehearsals, but I guessed he was still pretty tired and needed a pick-me-up.

The seals then went through their more usual routine: balanced balls, climbed ladders and even played a Christmas carol on the harmonica. The act was about over when I began to

notice a little unsteadiness in Durov's gait. Then, just as the last trick was finished, he turned to the audience, made a handsome bow, sat down on a bench and quietly passed out. Lyuba, Misha and Shura waited a moment for their next cue then flopped across the floor to their master, took one good look at him and stamped.

There are several versions of what happened during the next fifteen minutes. I can only tell what I saw. Misha disappeared into the audience. Lyuba bolted for the pantry where the smells of a fine supper were rising from the basement kitchen. I went for Shura (she was the only one who didn't bite) and managed after several minutes to herd her into the chute and back to the dressing room. As I locked her in, I heard a fine mixture of a seal barking, women screaming and German cursing coming up from the kitchen. I got down just in time to find the kitchenmaids scampering in all directions, and the newly arrived Austrian chef jumping up and down on the kitchen table while Lyuba circled around the table bellowing like an angry cow and upsetting coal scuttles, chairs, garbage cans and anything else that got in the way of her big flippers.

The chef was holding a large frying pan and was trying very ineffectually to beat Lyuba on the nose. Just what he was hoping to accomplish, I don't know. But it seemed to amuse Lyuba for every time he took a pass at her, she'd duck out of reach, bellowing with obvious delight. When the chef saw me standing in the doorway, he screamed: «Do something, for the Gott's love. Do something! Is no use standing there like laughing jackass!»

While the chef screamed, Lyuba roared and the kitchen help twittered noisily.

Eventually the commotion attracted the attention of Durov's assistant who had been having a little fun in the servants' hall. He immediately took charge of the situation like the traditional drummer boy in a military rout - which indeed it was. He dashed upstairs, dragged the limp Durov from the ballroom, fetched a pan of very smelly dead fish from his truck and proceeded to realign his forces. The formation he produced was almost as unique as the situation itself. I found myself holding Durov under the armpits in front of me while from behind me the assistant reached around in front of Durov, shook the fish in the direction of Lyuba and made noises presumably imitative of the semi-conscious trainer. One sniff of the fish was enough for Lyuba. She stopped her wild dance around the kitchen table and slithered across the floor towards us while we slowly backed toward the stairs leading to the dressing room. We'd got halfway up to the first landing with Lyuba in pursuit when she suddenly suspected she was being tricked and paused. Relaxing on a stone staircase is not the easiest thing for a seal to do. As soon as she stopped climbing, she lost her hold and slid to the foot of the stairs. We followed after her. I shook Durov to try to make him look alive. The trainer shook the fish and made strange noises. Lyuba changed her mind and decided we were on the level and started after us again. But again she paused, slipped and ended at the foot of the stairs.

While this was going on, the kitchen help, the yardman, the janitor and the chauffeurs had gathered around the foot of the stairs shouting encouragement and advice. Each time Lyuba slid back down towards them, they scattered in disorder.

«Get some brooms», I shouted at them. «When she begins to slide the next time, ram the brooms under her and hold her up. AU she needs is a little support».

The brooms were quickly produced and three or four of the more courageous souls below followed gingerly after Lyuba as she started once again to clamber after the limp body of her master and-what was no doubt far more attractive-after the pan of very smelly fish. The next time she paused the brooms held her in place until she could be inveigled into taking a few more steps.

Eventually we reached the head of the stairs and in a few moments she had joined Shura in their dressing room. Then we rounded up Misha who had been going through a series of unrehearsed acts among the guests. Finally the truck was backed up to the side door and the seals were carefully herded down the chute into the truck and off to the Circus.

Later I found out that the journey hadn't been entirely without excitement. Halfway home, on a busy boulevard Lyuba, still restless after her kitchen experience, had [umped over the side of the truck just as she'd leaped over the wall of the chute to the kitchen stairs. In winter the streets of Moscow are usually an icy composition of hard-packed snow - as slippery as the best skating rink. Lyuba was in her element and took off down the boulevard at a mile a minute with the trainer's assistant sliding after her. Just how she was finally brought to heel I never discovered but I do know that half the militia in the Arbat District chased her to the very edge of the Moscow River before they surrounded her.

Back at the Embassy, all that was left of the Circus was Durov. His assistant had promised to come back for him as soon as the seals were put in bed. By the time the assistant got back after Lyuba's second dash for freedom, Durov was again on his feet, not quite sober, but almost his old cheerful self. It took some talking to persuade him that his share of the party was over and that it was time to go home, but only after I'd promised to drive him in my new Ford convertible did he finally agree to go. The three of us drew up to the Circus building well after three a.m. The trainer and I each gave Durov an arm and helped him into the building and across the ring to the big animal-room beyond, where most of the animals were housed, Halfway across the ring a mysterious figure loomed out of the darkness. It was the night watchman, muffled up in a huge hairy sheepskin overcoat, his rifle slung behind him, the barrel sticking up behind his head like a misplaced horn.

«Sh-sh», he whispered out of the mass of fur that completely hid his face. «Go quietly, the elephant's asleep».

I almost dropped Durov in the tanbark. Had all of Moscow gone mad? I looked questioningly at the assistant. He apparently understood my feelings.

«It's all right», he said. «He just means the elephant is lying down. Elephants don't usually lie down to sleep. It's a rare sight».

We tiptoed silently across the ring. Why, I don't know. It was like everything else that night. If we'd had hobnailed boots on, we couldn't have made enough noise on the tanbark to scare a mouse.

In the animal-room we switched on one small light and there, sure enough, was the elephant comfortably stretched out on the straw, sleeping peacefully. The only sensible creature I'd seen all evening, I thought. As we stood admiring him, there was a rattle of chains down at the far end of the animal-room. In the darkness I couldn't see what had made the noise. But Durov apparently recognized it.

«Dushka, my little soul», he shouted, tore himself from the assistant and dashed into the gloom, his assistant and I right behind him. When we reached the end of the room, I could just make out a huge brown bear standing on his hind legs and tugging at a chain by which he was fastened to the wall. He waved his two great paws petulantly about as he swayed and tugged against the chain.

«Dushka, my little pet», Durov yelled again, and stretched out his arms to hug the bear. He had almost got his hands around the shaggy beast's neck when his assistant grabbed him by the scruff of his coat and pulled him back.

«You damn fool», he muttered. «It's the wrong bear».

Charles Thayer

Bears in the Ballroom

During the early thirties, and right up until the purges of 1937-1939, *Intourist* carried on a brisk trade with Americans in search of adventure, paradise or emancipation. It was mostly women who came for emancipation after reading the books about free love in Russia. But they also came to see the abortion clinics (closed in 1936), the Kremlin Museum (closed to outsiders in 1937), or the University (closed to most foreigners by 1938). There were professors who came to study the new economics of planning; agriculturalists who wanted to see how the collective farm system worked; engineers who wanted to see the famous new subway. But usually they were just tourists who wanted to see what was going on in general and be able to tell their friends they'd been to Russia.

One of them came on a bet that she would wear her famous diamonds on the streets of Moscow. When we explained to her that they had a relatively limited market in Russia and consequently were not very likely to be stolen, the novelty of the stunt rapidly wore off and she left the diamonds in her hotel room. (Just to be on the safe side, however, we asked Intourist to station a couple of detectives in the hall outside her room).

Norman Thomas ⁽²⁾ and his wife turned up to see the difference between socialism and communism. They enjoyed themselves thoroughly even when we got stuck in some collective farm mud and they had to get out of my car and push. It was the only time in my life I'd been pushed through the mud by a presidential candidate and I'm afraid the Thomases were as unsuccessful in getting me out of the bog as they were in getting into the White House. But they were very good sports and we always enjoyed their visits.

Then there was **Lawrence Tibbett** ⁽³⁾ who came to hear the Soviets sing. We took him and his wife on a picnic on the bluff overlooking the Moscow Valley - not far from the polo grounds. After supper we were sitting about the campfire talking about the Socialist experiment and its influence on the opera business. Below us in the valley several flocks of sheep were grazing. As it grew dark the shepherds began to sing to each other. Since they were fairly widely separated from each other they took turns, each singing a line or a stanza. After listening to them for a few minutes, Tibbett joined the chorus doing his part at the top of his voice. The peasants must have been a little puzzled by the unknown voice for little by little their voices seemed to come closer. Then the singing stopped and we could hear the sound of scrambling feet on the steep bluff below us. A few moments later the inquisitive, shy faces of a hundred sheep poked diffidently into the firelight. Behind them came the shepherds with their dogs and sat- down beside us.

«Who was that fellow with the voice?» one of them asked.

Tibbett confessed it was he. «You've a good, natural voice», they said, «but you need some training».

Through an interpreter, Tibbett asked if they couldn't give him some pointers. They quickly agreed and in a few minutes they were teaching him an ancient Russian peasant song. It wasn't too long before Tibbett had got the tune and was singing as lustily as any of them. «He learns easily», one of the shepherds whispered to me. «If he took a little trouble he could make something of that voice».

It was well over midnight and the sheep had long since curled up in a huge circle at the edge of the firelight, when Tibbett finally decided he'd had enough singing lessons for a day. We stamped out the fire as the shepherds raised their little round peakless caps and bowed themselves back in the darkness followed by their sleepy flocks.

The social season among the diplomats in Moscow lasted from early autumn until late spring with a few summer parties thrown in for good measure. The first time we Americans got into the social whirl was some time after Ambassador Bullitt's arrival. He'd been the round of the other Embassies at soirées, concerts and dances, and was not particularly impressed by the originality of the entertainment. So when he went to Washington on consultation at the end of the winter of 1934-1935 he left instructions that three days after his return he wanted a party laid on that would compete with anything Moscow had yet experienced, before or after the Revolution. «The sky's the limit», he told me, «just so long as it's good and different».

After my experience with the seals I was a little wary about wild animals, but Irena Wiley, the Counselor's wife, insisted that there be some animals at least. No other Embassies ever had anything more lively as entertainment than a tenor. And our orders were to be different.

«Let's get some farm animals and make a miniature barnyard in a corner of the ballroom. We can call it a *Spring Festival*». I knew better than to argue. It sounded easy enough. All we would need were some baby lambs and some wild flowers and a few little birch trees in pots. But we'd figured without the weather.

Two weeks before the party was scheduled it was still cold and miserable outside and the snow was still knee-deep in the forests. The birch trees and flowers hadn't even begun to think about blooming. Besides, we began to run into difficulties with the sheep. A collective farm had agreed to let us have some, but when we tried them out at a dress rehearsal the smell they gave off was too much for any ballroom. We tried washing them, dipping them, perfuming them, but it was no good. Then we tried some young goats.

Surprisingly enough they were better but atmosphere was pretty heavy even with them. We went to our friend the Director of the Zoo. He'd got more friendly now and a little less nervous about collaborating with foreigners. He suggested mountain goats.

«They smell less than barnyard varieties and are even more of a novelty». So he loaned us half a dozen baby mountain goats and we rigged up a little barnyard for them on a platform at the head of the buffet table.

But Irena decided mountain goats weren't enough. No barnyard was complete without some roosters. We'd hang them in glass cages around the walls of the dining room, she explained. But Moscow was out of glass cages big enough for roosters. So we dismantled the glass towel racks from the apartments of all the American Embassy staff, thereby stirring up a minor revolution, and set the carpenter to work to build the cages. We told the rack owners that, provided nothing went wrong, they'd have the towel racks back later. (All but one or two were, in fact, returned).

Even a dozen white roosters still didn't satisfy Irena. "«One small wild animal won't do any harm», she argued. «A baby bear, for instance».

So we got a baby bear from the Zoo and built him a little platform complete with a tree trunk to sleep on. The Director of the Zoo was reluctant to let us have him though and insisted that a properly trained nurse accompany him to the party. Remembering the seal trainer I asked him to pick a teetotaller for a nurse and he promised he would.

That still didn't solve the problem of the late spring. There were only ten days till the ball and there wasn't a sign of a bud in the whole of Moscow Oblast. Then somebody thought it might be warmer in the south. So we chartered a plane and told the pilot to go to the Crimea and bring back whatever flowers he could find. Then next day he telegraphed from Yalta: «Spring late here too».

«Try the Caucasus», we wired back. Two days later he returned to Moscow with the news that it was even colder in Tiflis than in Moscow.

Two of our major problems were the birch forests for the ballroom and the green lawn which we planned to have on the dining room table. The table had been built for the occasion. It was about ten yards long and a yard and a half wide. Every two or three feet we'd built troughs running the width of the table. In the troughs we planned to put flowers but there weren't any flowers. Between the troughs, where the buffet platters would stand, we were going to have lawn grass, but there wasn't any grass. The ballroom was to have been a mass of wild flowers; but there weren't any wild flowers.

Just as we were really getting nervous the Stage Director of the *Kamerney Theatre* came to the rescue. We didn't need wild flowers at all. We could have them painted on glass slides and projected against the white marble walls.

«A little cold and dead», Irena commented.

«We can cheer it up with an aviary», the Director suggested.

«More wild life?» I asked dubiously. But there was nothing else to be done. So we got some out-of-work artist to paint the flowers and arranged to have the *Kamerney Theatre* closed the evening of the party so we could use their projectors.

The aviary caused us a little trouble until someone suggested buying a fisherman's net, gilding it, and wrapping it between two large pillars in the ballroom. We tried it and it worked. I went to the Zoo Director and asked for some golden pheasants, parakeets, and whatever other feathered life he had a good supply of. He suggested a hundred zebra finches. «They're small but very pretty», he explained. They were pretty and small - a little too small for the fish net as it turned out.

But the grass and the flowers for the buffet table had us stumped until we asked the Department of Botany at the University for help.

«That's easy», they said. «You can grow some chicory on wet felt. It makes excellent lawn. As for the birch forest, just root up a few trees, put them in a hot room for a few days and they'll begin to get green».

So we covered the attic floor with wet felt and filled one bathroom with a dozen ten-foot trees and waited. The botany people turned out to be right and a day or so before D-Day the grass grew, the trees turned green, and we all heaved a sigh of relief. All we needed now were the flowers for the buffet table. We sent a courier to Helsinki where they were capitalistic enough to have greenhouses for the bourgeoisie and he brought back a thousand tulips. He'd got his orders a little confused though and bought them cut instead of in pots. But we put them in cold storage and they managed to stand up until the party was over.

For entertainment we got a Czech jazz band that was visiting Moscow and a gypsy orchestra complete with dancers. The latter held forth in my downstairs bedroom fixed up to look like a gypsy camp. On the second floor we set up a Caucasian shashlik restaurant where a Georgian band held forth and a Georgian sword-dancer performed.

The Caucasian restaurant was a rather late idea and by the time I'd had the garden furniture painted for the occasion there wasn't time for it to dry. The resulting green stripes on the dinner jackets of the Diplomatic Corps could be seen for months later. A certain coolness toward me on the part of the wearers was also discernible.

When the big night finally arrived Ambassador Bullitt awaited his guests under the chandelier of the main ballroom. To his considerable annoyance he was joined there by one of the zebra finches who had managed to get through the fish net. When I came upon the scene Bullitt and his Counselor Wiley, complete with white tie, tails, and white gloves, were stealthily stalking the finch around the ballroom in a vain attempt to surround it.

Among the first guests to arrive were Foreign Minister **Litvinov** and his wife, **Ivy**. Ivy took one look at the barnyard scene in the dining room and decided it was a collective farm. We tried to explain it was a perfectly ordinary capitalistic barnyard but she was not convinced and, to prove it, she expropriated one of the baby goats and held it in her arms throughout the evening.

In all, there were about five hundred people including the Diplomatic Corps; most of the Politburo including **Voroshilov, Kaganovich** and **Bukharin**; the leading generals of the Red Army including **Yegorov**; the Chief of Staff, **Tukhachevski** who was executed two years later after a court-martial by Yegorov, who himself was shot a year later.

There was the old perennial **Budenny** who managed to sit in judgment on both Yegorov and Tukhachevski and is still alive. **Radek** the leading Soviet political writer until his liquidation two years later, was also there with his strange fuzzy whiskers neatly trimmed around the edges of his jawbone. In fact, except for **Stalin**, practically everyone who mattered in Moscow turned up.

When all the guests had arrived the lights in the ballroom were turned down, the flowers from the projector appeared on the walls, and on the high-domed ceiling a constellation of stars complete with a bright moon turned up. This was a last minute addition from the *Kamerney Theatre* Director's fund of bright ideas.

As time for supper approached I took one last look at my roosters who lined the walls of the dining room in their glass towel-rack cages. They were still covered up in the hope that when the covers were taken off and the dining room lights turned up they might by chance think it was dawn. When I'd finally got the signal from the Ambassador and the chef that all was ready, only one of the twelve roosters was fooled but he set up such a crowing that you could hear it all over the house. However, his good performance was spoiled a bit by another rooster who decided that sitting in a glass cage in an Embassy banquet hall was a lot of damn nonsense. He succeeded in kicking the bottom out of his cage and flew clumsily into a platter of paté de foie gras which we'd had sent all the way from Strasbourg for the occasion.

During the entire evening I was far too busy settling jurisdictional rows between the pastry chef and the meat cook over whose stove was whose, or seeing to it that the wine supply flowed in the right direction from the wine cellar to the dining room and not into the chauffeurs' lounge. So I missed it when Radek discovered the baby bear lying on his back with a bottle of milk in his arms. Radek took away the bottle, put the nipple over a bottle of champagne and replaced it in the bear's arms. The bear had two or three lusty sucks of Mum's Cordon Rouge before he discovered his mistake and hurled the bottle on to the floor. Radek had disappeared by this time and Yegorov, the Chief of Staff, noticing how distressed the bear was, picked it up in his arms and put it over his shoulder as though he were burping a baby. He must have done it just a little too well because the baby bear burped most effectively all over Yegorov's brand-new bemedalled and beribboned tunic!

The first I knew about what was going on was when I heard the good General roar. By the time I got to the scene a half dozen waiters were sponging him down with napkins and finger bowls. But the damage was far too great for halfway measures of that sort and the General was in a fine old military frenzy.

«What sort of place is this anyway?» he shouted at me. «Do the Americans invite guests just to have them messed up by wild animals? Is this an Embassy or a circus? Tell your

Ambassador that Soviet Generals are not accustomed to being treated like clowns».

With that he stalked out of the room toward the front door with me trotting along behind trying unsuccessfully to explain it hadn't been planned that way. But Yegorov was still cursing and shouting as he stormed out the door. «This is the last time I ever go through this door», he concluded and marched out of the house.

I reported the incident to the Ambassador, caught another scolding from him, marked the whole business down to profit and loss and went about settling another argument in the kitchen as to who should have the honour of lighting the plum pudding. About an hour later the head butler called me to the front door.

«There is another guest coming», he explained. I hurried down to the entrance just in time to see General Yegorov in another brand-new tunic come marching in.

«I decided it wasn't your fault after all. Babies will be babies even when they're bears», he laughed. «And I did want to have just one more dance».

At nine o'clock next morning there were still a handful of hardy souls keeping the orchestra busy. At ten we wound up the party with **Tukhachevski** doing a Georgian dance with **Lolya Lepishinkaya**, the new ballet star. It was Tukhachevski's last appearance in the Embassy before he was shot.

By ten-thirty, however, the remaining guests had gone. Among the last were the Turkish Ambassador, **Vassif Bey**, an enormous gentleman sometimes referred to as *Massive Bey*, who died of a heart attack the next year, and **Oumansky** who later was Soviet ambassador in Washington and then in Mexico where he was killed in an aeroplane accident.

When the door closed on the last guest, I sat down and ordered a bottle of champagne. It was the first drink I'd had since the show started. When I'd finished it I started to clear up the shambles. The first thing to do was catch the birds in the aviary and put them back into their cages in which they came from the Zoo. I'd caught the pheasants and parakeets and was making some progress with the zebra finches when the champagne plus the evening's activities caught up with me and I decided to go to bed. Unfortunately though I forgot to fasten the aviary door. I'd hardly got into bed before the Ambassador's valet woke me. «The Ambassador wants to see you at once in the ballroom».

Sleepily I stumbled into some clothes and out on to the scene of the previous evening's battle. Under the chandelier stood the Ambassador looking more than a little annoyed. The cause of his bad humour was obvious enough when I looked up into the high dome of the room to see a flock of zebra finches merrily skimming through the air.

«Well», said the Ambassador, «stop staring and do something about those damn birds before they ruin every stick of furniture in the Embassy». With that he marched back into his study.

It was a nice problem - especially after a night like that. Obviously I was going to need some expert help so I telephoned the Director of the Zoo and asked him to send his best bird catcher. The bird catcher trundled up the Embassy drive on his bicycle a few minutes later with a net and the disassembled sections of a long handle under his arms.

«It won't be any trouble at all», he said as he came into the house. «I can catch them in a minute».

«But wait till you see the room...», I began to explain.

«No, it won't be difficult...» He was screwing the sections of the net's handle together as he walked down the hall to the ballroom. We got to the door and he looked up at the sixty-foot ceiling and gaped. There was a moment of silence and then the direction of his hands as he wound the parts of the handle reversed.

«But why didn't you tell me it was like this?» he asked plaintively as he disassembled the rod.

When the bird catcher had left I wandered around from room to room, puzzled and disconsolate. By this time the flock of finches had split up into a number of sub-flocks which distributed themselves throughout the Embassy. Soon the whole house was filled with their chirpings and droppings.

From time to time the Ambassador appeared from his study and glared about him. «Well», he would say, «whatever you're going to do, you'd better get started. Much more of this and we won't have a decent piece of furniture left».

It was well after dark when I suddenly got an idea. I asked the butler to round up the whole staff and soon every last kitchenmaid and yardboy was assembled in my bedroom while I explained the strategy. We turned out all the lights in the house and opened all the windows. On each window sill we put one bright lamp. Then armed with brooms, pillows, and any other throwable object we could find we went from room to room stirring up the birds till they flew toward the light. Once in the window we'd give them a final shoo and chase them into the night. I knew the Zoo Director wasn't going to enjoy losing his zebra finches but I also knew he had a lot more of them - more at any rate than I had prospects of jobs. For three hours the house was a hubbub of rushing wings and pillows and people but in the end the finches were out and the Embassy liberated.

It was the last party the Ambassador ever asked me to organize - I like to think it was because I was getting too valuable in other lines of diplomatic work.

- (1) **Elsa Maxwell** (1883-1963) was an American gossip columnist, songwriter, screenwriter, and professional hostess. She was world famous for her parties for royal guests and other celebrities of her time. She is said to have introduced the *scavenger hunt* (a kind of treasure hunt) and the *treasure hunt* as party games.
- (2) **Norman Mattoon Thomas** (1884-1968) was an American Presbyterian minister who gained fame as a Socialist and as a Pacifist, and as a sixfold presidential candidate for the *Socialist Party of America*.
- (3) **Lawrence Mervil Tibbett** (1896–1960) was a famous American opera singer who also acted as a film actor and radio personality. As a baritone, he sang more than 600 times with the *Metropolitan Opera* in New York City from 1923 to 1950

Thayer, Charles, *Bears in the Caviar. A Diplomat in Russia*, Michael Joseph Ltd., London, 1952, 288 pp.