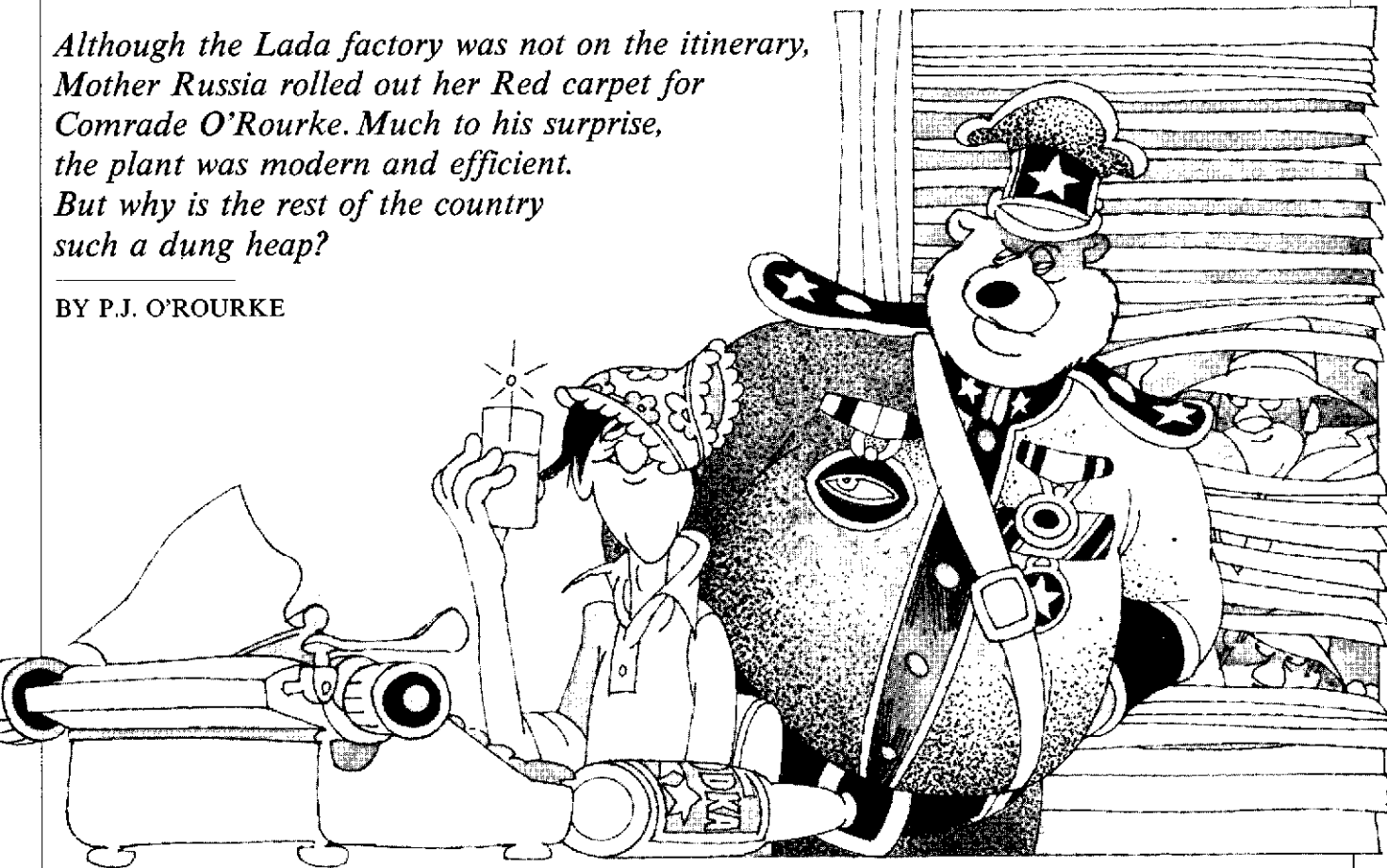


# P.J. and the Bear

*Although the Lada factory was not on the itinerary, Mother Russia rolled out her Red carpet for Comrade O'Rourke. Much to his surprise, the plant was modern and efficient. But why is the rest of the country such a dung heap?*

BY P.J. O'ROURKE



• I accidentally toured a Russian car factory last summer. I was doing a story for *Harper's* magazine on American peace activists who were traveling through the Soviet Union to pester baffled natives about international understanding. Every time the activists and I arrived in a new town, Intourist (a sort of Russian combination Travelers' Aid and your mother) would herd us aboard sightseeing buses and take us to rubberneck the 55 local war monuments and the place where Lenin took a leak against a wall.

In Togliatti, on the upper Volga, one of the sights was the big Lada automobile plant. Most of the peace yahoos were Old Left types, still fighting the labor battles of the Pullman-strike era and waiting for Eugene V. Debs to get out of jail. They were eager to visit this factory. After all, here they were in the workers' paradise, and they wanted to talk peace and understanding with some workers, by George.

"No, no, is nyet permit," said the In-

tourist guides. Not that the factory was restricted. It's just that a tour of it wasn't in the plan. And when things aren't in the plan in the C.C.P., things aren't in the plan.

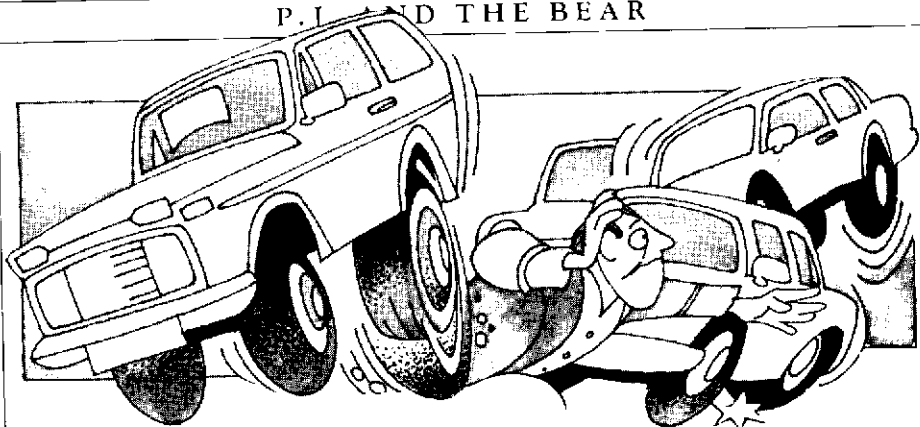
A Soviet journalist named Borislav was also covering this peace excursion. Neither he nor I gave a shit about international understanding, and we'd struck up a friendship based on this and on the Russian happy hour. (Happy hour is slightly different in the Soviet Union. There are no ice cubes or orange-peel twists in the vodka. Also, it lasts all day.) Borislav knew I wrote for an American car magazine, and when the leftists started agitating for a factory tour, he decided to have some fun. He called Lada and told them a U.S. automotive expert was in town.

Now the Russians could care less about American leftists. I guess they have enough of their own. But the Russian bear would love to be thought of as America's equal in industry as well as in

MIRV warheads. When anyone even vaguely connected with the American business establishment is around, the Russians go all gooey like Matt Dillon fans. It was thus that a big, chauffeured Volga sedan pulled up to the tour HQ, and I—the only avowed Republican for a thousand miles in any direction—was whisked off for a personal tour of the Lada works.

(I understand the Americans decided this meant I was a KGB agent. Until then, they'd been pretty certain I was with the FBI.)

I wasn't expecting much from the factory. Russian cars are silly. They look like imports drawn by an editorial cartoonist for a UAW newsletter. The most commonly seen car, the Moskvich, only comes in about three colors, and there is a blunt, thick detailing to it that makes you think you're in a 1950s production of the *Nutcracker Suite* and a Tootsie Toy has just come to life. Also, the Russians don't have a clue about



making shock absorbers, so their cars hop and bobble down the road in a manner most absurd. Standing in downtown Moscow in the midst of heavy traffic is like being in a pen full of red, white, and yellow giant bunny rabbits. What's more, every internal-combustion device in the Soviet Union is as out of tune as a high-school-prom band. You could become a ruble millionaire if you stood on a corner with a screwdriver and a timing light.

So I was surprised when the Lada shop turned out to be fully modern, chockablock with efficient-seeming activity, and generally all that a factory should be. Indeed, it was a bit more. The place was as clean and quiet as a Japanese plant. The lights were bright. The paint was fresh. I thought the whole thing must be new. It was, in fact, some fifteen years old.

My tour was conducted by Alexander N. Savchuk, the deputy head of group (a junior vice-president, I think) of the Export and Foreign Relations Department. He told my chauffeur to drive the Volga inside the plant through a loading bay, and the production floor was so spacious and well organized that the car followed us the whole way while Savchuk and I walked the mile-and-a-half assembly line.

Savchuk was very proud of the factory. He did not make the usual Soviet camouflaged apology for technological lag. That is, he didn't angle the conversation around to World War II and point out that the entire industrial complex had to be rebuilt in a weekend by two war widows and an eight-year-old boy. Instead, he sprouted statistics and encouraged Borislav and me to examine every nook and cranny of manufacture.

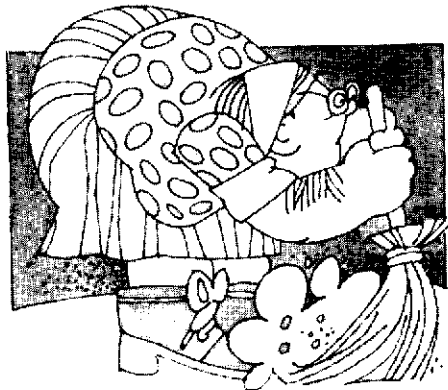
Savchuk's pride was not misplaced. The line was moving smoothly. Parts that seemed to be well made were being put together with apparent speed and care. Welds, stampings, forgings, and millings were all of good quality. They were not, perhaps, up to the best European standards, but they appeared to be better than some American work. Grindings and paint finishes were only

slightly bumpy. The interior and trim fittings looked excellent. The Lada factory was the first impressive thing I'd seen in the Soviet Union.

However, it wasn't built by the Soviets. The plant was designed and constructed by Fiat. And the Lada cars, though modified, are Fiat 124s in their hearts. Frankly, when the only impressive thing you've seen in a country was built by Italians, you know that country has problems.

Some explanation of these Soviet problems is in order. We're told a lot about the Soviet Union. We're told it's oppressive, and we're told it's grim. I expected the people to be regimented, humorless, and bent under the yoke of totalitarianism. But they weren't. The Russians drive like loons, drink too much, argue with policemen, and generally act like people everywhere. Their stupid system of governance has its effects not so much on the people as on their physical environment.

What nobody bothers to tell us about Russia is that it's a mess. I was prepared for fear, despair, and repression. I was not prepared for a country of 260 million without a single lawn mower. There are also no full-length broom handles. Everywhere you go, you see ancient



charwomen bending double to sweep floors with straw bound to foot-long sticks. These floors invariably slope off in one direction or another. Every building is out of true. There is not a plumb line or a right angle in the na-

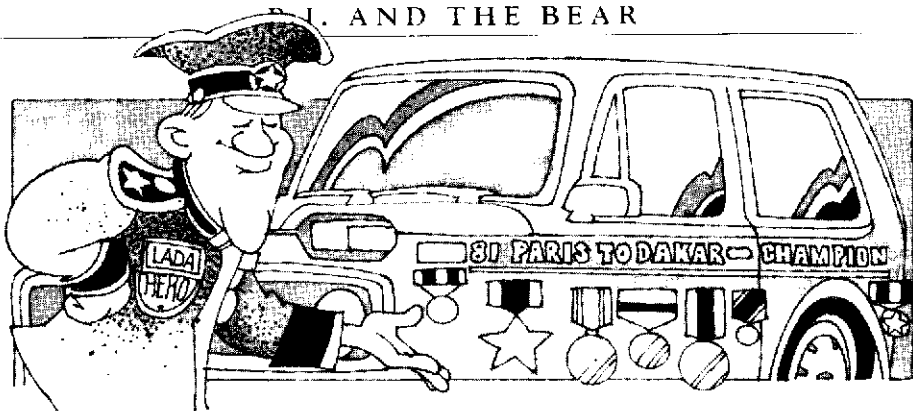
tion. Ceilings, walls, curbs, and pavings are bucked and heaved in cranky aspects. The streets contain great numbers of big holes, apparently dug on purpose, the purpose forgotten and the holes abandoned to catch unwary passers-by. Much of everything is coated in chalky, peeling paint of a urine color that, if you produced it yourself, would send you running to a kidney specialist. The entire Soviet Union, even inside the Kremlin, is haphazard, improvised, sloppy, lumpy, and about to fall down.

Most underdeveloped countries are like this. Poverty and antiquation make them so. But the Soviet Union is not poor, and all the things I've described are new. Russia isn't like Mexico. Mexico is a mess, all right, but give a Mexican a roll of gaffer's tape and a pair of Vise-Grips and he can make anything work. In Russia, however, State Collective Gaffer's Tape Store Number 56 is out of gaffer's tape, and the Soviet version of Vise-Grips is made from pot metal and snaps to pieces in your hand. The Soviet Union is a mess with a message—an extraordinary display of poor judgment, bad taste, and ineptitude, all resulting from well-thought-out decisions. Any great man-made disaster requires planning, and doctrinaire Marxist central planning seems particularly effective.

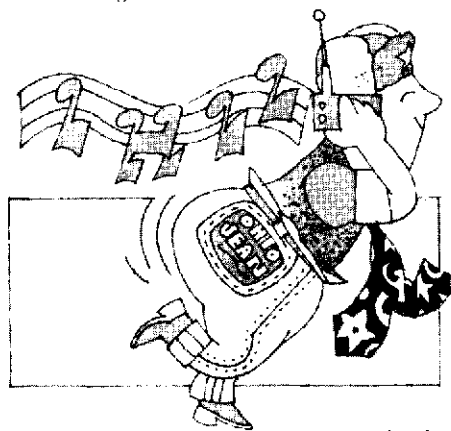
But the Lada plant was different. And there weren't any Italians hanging around to keep the Soviet ducks in a row. Evidently, some exception to the rules of central planning had been made in this place. For instance, everyone was working. Most of Russia is filled with people whose job seems to be to sit in doorways blocking your entrance into places you didn't want to enter anyway. Not at Lada. Everyone there seemed to have a real job, and the real jobs seemed to be getting done.

It's not an effect that factories usually have on me, but my spirits soared. I'd been nearly three weeks in the Soviet Union, and I was exhausted with crumminess, clumsiness, and gross mismanagement, exhausted with a country that combines the charm of Newark with the efficiency of Chad. Suddenly, at Lada, I was in the world of intelligent pragmatism, the real world. Here was creation, fabrication, the working of man's will on the world—or on some sheetmetal anyway. The slam of fender dies, the spray of welding sparks, the odor of steel and oil swelled me with that great American get-your-hands-on-it, do-it-to-it emotion. I was smiling like a jackass and all but dancing with pleasure at the pure operativeness of the place.

I went slightly dopey over the cars. Savchuk was telling me how wonderful they are. "Is Fiat? Not hardly longer



now," he said. "Each piece is having been redesigned to most severe conditions of Soviet Union and export markets such as even Canada." He told me the University of Stockholm had judged the Lada to have the best mass-produced engine in the world. And he



beamed as he displayed the four-wheel-drive Lada Niva and told me how it had won the 1981 Paris-to-Dakar rally. What the heck, I bit. I was feeling completely proprietary about the cars by the time they rolled off the end of the line. I was in love with all of them and with everyone in the factory.

Of course Ladas aren't really much good. They're slow. They're heavy. Their reliability record isn't swell. And no matter what Savchuk said, they're still twenty years out of date and Italian. But, by Russian standards, they're Porsche 928s in full race prep. And the Lada factory is Saint-Tropez.

I can only speculate on why and how this island of normal manufacturing and business practices manages to exist in the middle of the Soviet Union. Is it an attempt to compete with free-world consumer goods in order to earn hard currency? Is it a social experiment? Is it a concession to some technocrat faction in the Communist Party? I don't know. But the Lada factory was an exception that only proved the strength of the general rule.

Once outside the Lada gates I was right back in Lower Slobbovia. Imagine a world where something like the National Transportation Safety Board

makes all the men's fashion decisions. Russian neckties alone are worth an hour comedy special on HBO. And fuzzy official notions of what's hep manifest themselves in clown-cut denim trousers with 40-gallon seats and dinner-plate-size rubber patches on the back reading "Ohio Jean."

There is a problem in Russia that goes much deeper than central planning or nonsensical political beliefs. Outside of the Lada factory, every physical object bears, in its craftsmanship, the in-eradicable stamp of "close enough for government work." The window glass is wavy, the post cards are out of register, the woodwork trim is painted with a six-inch brush made from oxtails, and tobacco dribbles out the ends of the cigarettes. I took to putting the wooden matches back in the box after striking them because the used ones worked just as well as the new. And while flying from Moscow to Rostov on an Ilyushin jetliner, I was utterly panicked by the sight of the metal leg supporting the seat in front of me. It was a bowed and pitted hunk of aluminum with a couple of halfhearted rasp marks across the casting flanges. God, what did the turbine bearings look like?

The effect of this visit to Russia was to make me disgusted with government—not just with the Soviet perversion, but with government of every kind. Our government is different, of course. We don't have slave-labor camps and secret police and mental institutions full of people who forgot Karl Marx's birthday. But I wonder... Maybe the really big difference is that, in Russia, the dimwit government runs everything, not just the government.

It's thoughts like this that keep a humorist shivering under the bed sheets when instead he should be up making puns and wearing some girl's underpants on his head.

I give up. Serious thought was never my forte. Let's do what Borislav and I did back in the Soviet Union. We'll have another vodka, and here's to a lack of international understanding. Let's hope it keeps everybody's government too busy to pester us. ●